

LOCAL

# 102-year-old Rochester World War II veteran finally receives high school diploma

Rochester man dropped out of high school during the Great Depression to work on family farm.

By Jackie Renzetti Star Tribune | MARCH 9, 2017 — 9:34PM

At 102 years old, Leon Swendsen had survived World War II, driven about 1 million miles for Greyhound and raised four children. But there was still one missed opportunity that nagged him: He never graduated high school.

During the Great Depression, Swendsen dropped out of high school at 16 years old to help work on his family's farm and butcher shop. Nearly nine decades later, Swendsen donned a cap and gown and received an honorary high school diploma during a Rochester school board meeting Tuesday. He teared up as orchestra students played pomp and circumstance.

"I think school is one of the most important things for any kid," he said. "It was something that I'll never forget."

After his 100th birthday, his daughter Shelly Swendsen began researching honorary diplomas.

"I read in the 1930s how a lot of kids had to quit school because they had to help work on the farm, and they just didn't have a choice," she said. "It kind of made me think, you know, they really did deserve to get a diploma."

She e-mailed Superintendent Michael Muñoz in January, telling him the story of her dad's career in the Army and his pristine track record as a 40-year Greyhound bus driver. Within a day, Muñoz responded that he would help.

"I was amazed," Shelly Swendsen said.

She said she and her dad figured the ceremony would be short and simple, but were surprised to find a small student orchestra at the board meeting ready to play for him.

"Mr. Muñoz made it into a really touching moment," she said. "My dad has waited for this his whole life. He never thought he would get it. He knew he'd done well in society without it, but it still was a closure to him."

## A storied career

After helping support his family's farm and butcher shop in Culver, Minn., west of Duluth, Swendsen started driving trucks at 18. About eight years later, he became a bus driver for Greyhound, which was still a small, Hibbing-based company.

"I loved driving," he said.

After World War II started, he drove hundreds of draftees to hospitals for evaluations. He was drafted three times but deferred so that he could continue transporting the future soldiers.

"Every time he'd bring more guys to Fort Snelling ... it really kind of started tugging at his heart, so he finally enlisted," Shelly said.

He served as a cook from 1943-1946 in the Army's 569th Field Artillery in Germany. When he returned, he resumed his old job at Greyhound, which he kept until his retirement.

Swendsen said he wanted to work in the kitchen to ensure he wouldn't injure himself so he could keep driving after he was discharged.

And at 102, Swendsen still keeps his cooking chops sharp. His Danish pastry is a popular request among family members, Shelly said.



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Leon Swendsen, 102, in cap and gown received an honorary diploma from the Rochester Public Schools on Tuesday.

When he's not in the kitchen, he enjoys painting by number and often gifts his masterpieces to friends and family. He routinely beats his family in any card game.

"He's very intact," Shelly said. "We spend as much time together as we can as a family."

Now that Swendsen's got his diploma, he has one more big goal in life.

"I want to be the oldest veteran in the United States," he said.

Jackie Renzetti is a University of Minnesota student on assignment for the Star Tribune.

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