

Working mom earns a college degree with a little help from friends



Credit: Rebecca Wright

Latonya Young's friend Essence Johnson helps her with her cap and gown at Georgia State University's student center in downtown Atlanta, Georgia, on April 29, 2021. Young, a 44-year-old mother of three, will finally graduate from Georgia State University after numerous breaks in her education journey due to hardships. (Rebecca Wright for The Atlanta Journal-Constitution)

By [Ty Tagami](#)

May 1, 2021

Students across the globe are nearing the end of a school year complicated by a global pandemic, but one mother in college didn't let that hardship get in her way.

Latonya Young will graduate with a bachelor's degree from Georgia State University this month, despite COVID-19 and other obstacles that might have stopped other students.

Young, 44, was twice hospitalized for various conditions as the world reeled from the pandemic, and she totaled her car when a deer jumped in front of it. And her landlord raised her rent.

She considered taking a break from school but felt she couldn't with the world watching: Her story had gone viral before the pandemic started last year after [The Atlanta Journal-Constitution published an article about her fortuitous encounter](#) with Kevin Esch.

She had been working toward her associate's degree for years but had fallen behind on payments to Georgia State University. A hairdresser raising three boys, she had always worked multiple jobs. She

was driving for ride-hailing companies a couple of years ago when she gave Esch a ride. The Atlanta man was so moved by her story that he paid her debt so she could re-enroll.

Young graduated with an associate's degree in the months before the pandemic started. The story [appeared in hundreds of publications and broadcasts](#), and the two appeared on Ellen DeGeneres' show.

Explore [Read the original inspiring story about Latonya Young from the AJC in 2020](#)

Young continued with her studies, pursuing a bachelor's degree. She felt both blessed and stressed by the attention: She did not want to disappoint anyone, least of all Esch.

"I had so many people reaching out to me from other countries," she said recently. "Just telling me they were proud of me and I inspired them."

Esch, meanwhile, was planning to travel overseas after their appearance on DeGeneres' show: She granted him a free trip anywhere in the world, and he booked a flight to Australia.

"I was so excited about — so excited about — it, and then COVID-19," he said recently.



Credit: Courtesy

Credit: Courtesy

Latonya Young was able to complete her associate's degree at Georgia State University's Perimeter

College campus with some help from Kevin Esch, one of Young's Uber passengers. Esch paid off Young's outstanding balance to the college, allowing her to re-enroll. (Courtesy)

He plans to attend Young's May 6 graduation and downplayed his role in it. "She made it happen. I just kind of facilitated a little bit," he said.

Esch was asked to join the board of the Athens-based [Jeannette Rankin Foundation](#), which for more than four decades has been giving scholarships to older, low-income women like Young. (The organization also gave her scholarship money. And DeGeneres' show surprised her with a \$25,000 gift, which she said she used to offset tens of thousands of dollars in college debt.)

"I've realized there are a ton of other women who are in her position that are just scared to go back to school because they don't think they can do it," Esch said, "and she's kind of a shining example of being able to push through and do it."

Older students like Young face longer odds of graduating, said Timothy Renick, executive director of the National Institute for Student Success at GSU: about 40% nationally versus roughly 60% for younger students.

A temporary departure from school can permanently derail plans, he said. "You don't want students ever to lose that momentum because life gets in the way."

Though she was hospitalized twice during the pandemic, once for a nagging foot injury from a car crash years ago, and a second time for digestive issues, Young pressed on. She said a fellow student she'd met in a class just before the shift online had offered crucial support.

Essence Johnson, 24, shared class notes with her when she was in the hospital and encouraged her. Johnson said Young reciprocated, encouraging her too: Johnson's mother suffers from a serious illness, and Johnson considered taking a timeout from school to care for her.

"Don't let that stop you," she recalled Young telling her. "Because your mom wouldn't want you to stop."



Credit: Rebecca Wright

Credit: Rebecca Wright

Latonya Young poses for a photo at Georgia State University's student center in downtown Atlanta, Georgia, on April 29, 2021. Young, a 44-year-old mother of three, will finally graduate from Georgia State University after numerous breaks in her education journey due to hardships. (Rebecca Wright for The Atlanta Journal-Constitution)

Two of Young's three boys are now grown, including one who is a freshman at GSU and, like her, has attended a lot of classes through a computer from their home. Her youngest son is attending eighth grade online. A former substitute teacher, Young returned to that work during the pandemic, after losing her car to the deer while driving someone to Alabama for a fee.

Young has become an icon in Tifton, her hometown in Tift County, a three-hour drive south of Atlanta on I-75.

“People, they see her on TV, or they read about her and say ‘I know her.’ It really gives you a sense of pride to see a young person come up despite the hard knocks and despite the challenges,” said Larry Mims, a retired state court judge there.

He is an old family friend who found himself in the awkward position of sentencing her for a misdemeanor crime when she was in her 20s.

(The judge doesn’t remember the charge; Young said it involved fighting and said the case was dismissed.)

“As I always do with young folks, I started to talk to her about her future,” Mims recalled.

Unbeknownst to him, Young had held him up as a role model, a native son who had made good by becoming an attorney. Her favorable image of him was actually reinforced by the impartial and professional way he handled her case, she said.

Young said Mims — and the example set by a couple of cousins who went to college — stoked her dreams of becoming a lawyer.

Young majored in criminal justice and starts an internship as a security dispatcher at Six Flags this summer. She hopes to land a good job after that, so she can pay off her remaining college debt and save for her next step: that law degree.

About the Author



[Ty Tagami](#)

Ty Tagami is a staff writer for The Atlanta Journal-Constitution. Since joining the newspaper in 2002, he has written about everything from hurricanes to homelessness. He has deep experience covering local government and education, and can often be found under the Gold Dome when lawmakers meet or in a school somewhere in the state.