

Single mom, 43, returns to college, with unexpected help from stranger



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. Young and Esch are shown together last Sunday, but she will receive her associate's degree in criminal justice next week.

By [Ty Tagami](#)

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[Update from 2021: Latonya Young prepares to graduate with a bachelors's degree](#)

Some people graduate from high school, then go to college.

Latonya Young was not fated to follow that path.

The 43-year-old mother of three dropped out of high school at 16 when her first son, now 26, was born.

Although two other boys would come along in the coming decades, she still managed to get a GED, go to cosmetology school and start on a degree at Georgia State University.

Being a single mom, a student and an employee all at the same time is difficult, though, even for those who can afford it.

Young couldn't always find the money on her hairstylist's paycheck, a job that sometimes required her to moonlight with Uber or Lyft.

She still made halting progress on her education goal until a major setback eight years ago: Her right foot was crushed in a car crash. She fell behind on payments to GSU and couldn't go back until about \$700 in bills was paid.

When she raised the money, she always found something else to spend it on, like feeding the boys or buying them sneakers.

Then, a year ago, while driving for Uber, she picked up a man outside Mercedes-Benz Stadium, after an Atlanta United match. At the time, he lived in Virginia-Highland, but was going through a lifealtering change, and was in the process of moving.

They had an unusually deep conversation for a rideshare.

He told her about his divorce. She told him about her college dreams. He encouraged her to pursue them. He gave her the tip of a lifetime: \$150.

"He was telling me you're never too old to get an education," Young recalled. Young is certain she would eventually have gone back to college, even though she still has an 18-year-old and a 13-year-old at home. But she decided then to pay off her college bills, so she could get back on track.

She was on her way to GSU the following Monday morning, when she got a text from her former passenger. It contained a receipt from GSU. He'd beaten her to it: GSU said he paid off her \$693 balance, allowing her to re-enroll at the Perimeter College campus.

"It just made me feel good to do it," said that passenger, Kevin Esch. "I didn't expect anything from it."

He may not have realized the extent of what he had done. The money helped, sure, but Young said it was his belief in her — and the sense of responsibility she felt to live up to it — that pushed her to return to school immediately.

"Nobody's ever done anything so nice to me in my life," Young said.



Esch said he had never done something like that before. He doesn't have kids, and he's hit a stride in his career as an estate manager, and figured he could either waste the money or do something meaningful. Except for the schlep to GSU to pay her bills, he said his part was easy. She's the one who struggled through the coursework, he noted.

Esch had to make another trip to GSU this week. Young had stayed in touch with him over the past year, updating him on her grades. Then, she asked him to visit the university again, this time for a photo shoot outside the advisement center, with her in a black cap and gown.



Credit: Steve Thackston

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101st Commencement for Georgia State University. FILE PHOTO

She will graduate with an associate's degree in criminal justice next week, and she wanted to mark the occasion with him. She already has plans for a bachelor's degree, having been accepted to the university's Andrew Young School of Policy Studies starting in January. She hopes to earn the qualifications to become a federal probation officer, but she says she won't stop there. She plans to use that income to pay her way through law school.

Young said she has wanted to be a detective or a lawyer since she was around 10 years old. At first, she imagined being a prosecutor, but her life experience has steered her in a different direction: defense attorney.

"I would rather help people," she said, adding that she hopes her story thus far inspires others. "It's not how you start but how you finish in life."

It already may have inspired one person. While her 18-year-old readies himself to join the Navy, her youngest is eyeing college. She said he told her he wants to study marketing, and open his own firm.

About the Author



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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.