

Supermoms

Juggling diaper bags and book bags
By Lauren Margolis

Going to college is hard. Doing it while navigating the world of motherhood is even harder. More than one in 5 college students are parents, according to data from the National Postsecondary Student Aid Study. About 70% of those students raising children are moms. They balance taking classes, studying and raising a family — and in Barbara Myers' case, establishing a fresh start, too. Myers is a 61-year-old UCF graduate who started college as a grandmother. Right after graduating high school, Myers joined the Navy and met her husband of 34 years there. After he died of lymphoma in 2012, Myers said she decided to further her education and get a bachelor's degree in English. She said she chose English to be able to write about her husband's death and share his story with the world — that degree would help her do just that.

"I figured if I was going to write a story, I wanted to know how to do it properly and have a degree in it and learn how to not just write a memoir just because I can," Myers said. "I wanted to be able to write something that someone is going to want to publish for me." While Myers was working on her online classes, she often traveled around the U.S. or spent time with her grandchild. She now has three little ones, ages 2 and 10 years old and a month-old baby, who all call her "Nana." Myers said she was the eldest student in her classes and in most, she was older than her professors, making her feel like they looked at her differently than other students.

"I felt like sometimes I was set at a higher standard or different standard," Myers said. "I knew I was older than [the professors], but I wasn't questioning them. I was just wanting to learn from them."

Despite the relationship she had with her professors, she said they inspired her to discover another passion within the English major: poetry.

"I started writing a lot of poetry and it helped me with my grieving," Myers said. Myers graduated from UCF in 2017 at 53 years old. Since then, she started a poetry blog and writes for Odyssey Online, a crowdsourcing internet media company.

She is the eldest writer on the site and has stories published about today's political climate, feminism and even did some digging into the financial responsibilities of going to college.

School for Myers was a big motivation to feel better after her husband's death and she explained she viewed it as a fresh start.

She said she finally gets to follow her passion with the help of her English degree, something she's dreamed about getting since high school, but could never obtain because of her husband's Navy career. She said she enjoyed college and thinks about going back for her master's one day.

"I do miss it. I like the classroom and the communication," Myers said. "I'm a true believer that knowledge is power" of two Brittany Nguyen is another UCF graduate who recognizes the importance of earning a degree. She did it while starting a family.

Nguyen has been the store manager at Plato's Closet Waterford Lakes since 2011. Upon receiving the job, she said she took a year-long break from UCF to focus on the transition.

She said she went back to finish her degree in 2012, and found out she was pregnant with her first child, Avery, three years later.

Nguyen said she decided to switch it up and go from studying business to interdisciplinary studies with a focus in business management, since the degree was offered online and allowed her plenty of flexibility.

"I would come home from work, I would take care of my daughter, get her fed, get her down for bed and do the whole bedtime routine, and then I would start doing homework," Nguyen said about her day-to-day life while earning her degree.

She said she would catch up on schoolwork between 8 p.m. and midnight every night. But she said looking at the big picture and planning things ahead made her days less overwhelming.

"It was a lot of looking at everything from like a week standpoint instead of a day-to-day standpoint," Nguyen said.

Budgeting was also important for Nguyen and her husband Michael, since they were both in college when Avery was born. She said children and college are expensive, and the expenses that pop up for both add up to a lot of money.

"We were making sure that we had like textbooks for both of us and he'd be like 'Oh I need to buy my parking permit.' I'd be like 'Ugh, Ok, there's an extra hundred dollars right there,'" Nguyen said. After taking two courses per semester for about six years, Nguyen graduated from UCF in 2018. She was five months pregnant with her second child, Emery, and Avery was 2 years old at the time.

Nguyen said it can be a challenge balancing everything, but she said she had a lot of help from her support system — her family.

"I'm the luckiest girl in the world," Nguyen said. "My parents live right across the street from me and my mother-in-law moved in last year... she helps out and she actually does all my babysitting."

UCF student, aspiring nurse practitioner and mother of two Courtney Simmons also relies on her family to be her support system. She said her support system includes her sister, friends, stepkids, and husband, who works two full-time jobs so that Simmons can dedicate her time to her education.

Simmons is currently working on her Doctor of Nursing Practice at UCF and plans to graduate in 2021.

She found out she was pregnant with her daughter Emery during her first semester of getting her associate degree in nursing, giving birth to her in 2015. Simmons said she was terrified when she found out she was pregnant while still in school.

But she said she made it work. After starting graduate school in 2017, Simmons said she found out she was pregnant again and gave birth to her son Bronson the following year.

Before Bronson was born, Simmons was enrolled in online classes and said she was able to spend more time at home with

Everly. She said she even read her school notes to her daughter. Everly started school at two and a half years old, but Bronson needed to be put in daycare at 9 months old because of Simmons' demanding class schedule.

Simmons said she would rather finish up her schooling now before the kids start getting older. She said they're a big motivation for her but also stresses the importance of education and wants to show her kids that you can do anything.

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"Education in our house is a really big priority, so I feel like without doing all this, without getting the degrees, I can't really emphasize the importance of education without one of my own," Simmons said.

A typical week for her involves going to clinicals two days a week for nine hours, class on Thursdays and lots of studying in between it all. She said she tries to set aside at least two or three hours a day to do something school related and

like Nguyen, Simmons gets most of her homework done while the kids are asleep. In order to keep up with her hectic schedule, Simmons said she plans her days well in advance because the hardest part of being a mom and going to school is time management.

"I just tell myself I didn't come this far to only come this far," said Simmons. "There are some good and bad days but she said she keeps pushing through them."

"I just tell myself I didn't come this far to only come this far," said Simmons. Throughout her time at UCF, she said she has met other moms in the program, proving to her that it is doable.

"We're a big source of support for each other, not just school-wise, but you know, as parents and as mothers," Simmons said. She said she is grateful that UCF is accommodating to new moms and she's happy she chose the university.

"The more involved, the longer I've been going, the more proud I am to be a knight," Simmons said. "When all is said and done, I'll be proud to have said that I graduated from UCF." ☐



Courtney Simmons with 4-year-old daughter Everly and 18-month-old son Bronson. She is studying to be a nurse practitioner and said her kids are her biggest motivation in life. Because of this, Simmons said she chooses to lead by example and show them that hard work does pay off. Photo courtesy of Courtney Simmons.



Brittany Nguyen (left) holding son Emery and Nguyen's husband Michael (right) holding their daughter Avery. Nguyen said her and Michael were both enrolled at school while navigating parenthood with now 3-year-old Avery. Photo courtesy of Brittany Nguyen.

Barbara Myers with her 2-year-old granddaughter Leah. Myers decided to go back to college as a grandma to become more creative in her writing. She enjoys writing about politics, current events and her experiences with her grandchildren — she now has three of them. Photo courtesy of Barbara Myers.

