



The Lion's Eye

Vol. XXXVIII, No. 6

Penn State University, Delaware County

December 5, 2005



'College Seniors' Still Have a Yearn to Learn

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{The following is the second in a series profiling nontraditional students at Penn State-Delco.}

At an age where most people are thinking about retirement, 69-year-old Lillian Vecchio decided to take some art classes on suggestion from a friend.

"I started out taking only the classes I wanted to, so I took as many art classes as I could," she said. "Before long I found myself working towards a degree in liberal arts."

Vecchio receives an Associates degree next spring. After that she hopes to work towards a full degree in American Studies.

"This has been such an enriching experience for me," Vecchio said with a smile.

What's next for this 69 year-old "college senior"?

Vecchio said she's still too young to retire.

"I enjoy the theatre, museums and libraries. Anywhere I can enrich my life, I think that's where I'd like to work next," she said.

And, how about Bob Farrell? It's hard to miss the spry 80-year-old when he's on the PSU-Delco campus.

"I didn't want to rot in front of a television in the family room" Farrell said. "I think being active helps keep you healthy, and college gives me plenty to do. I need the challenge."

Farrell's daughter convinced him to return to college and take a creative writing course. Upon completion of the course, and his professor thought he should enroll full time.

"I received my associates in Letters Arts and Sciences last May, and now I'm going for my bachelors," said Farrell. "After returning to school and taking numerous classes, I have gained such a profound respect for these professors."

Though Farrell has no particular sights in mind after school, he is enjoying every moment of learning here at PSU-Delco.

Vecchio and Farrell are among the growing number of nontraditional-age students who are being eagerly welcomed by universities.

Nontraditional-age students are viewed as major assets not only in the classroom where their life experiences contribute significantly to the intellectual pursuit of their classes, but also in the community and at the state government level where they can be advocates for education.

At a recent College Board Forum 2005 in New York City, Penn State President Graham B. Spanier cautioned the more than a thousand educators attending that American education faces a crisis over the coming decades as a result of the nation's shifting demographics.

Spanier pointed out that through 2025 only nine states will have double-digit increases in high school graduates. Thirty states will experience a decline or no growth in the number of high school graduates. Most of the future increases in high school graduates in the U.S. will be in the Western and Southern states.

As a result of this trend, competition among universities for 18-year-olds will be more acute than ever, and the pressure to attract nontraditional students will increase dramatically.

It's little wonder then that colleges and universities are working hard to provide an environment conducive to their professional and personal needs on nontraditional students, especially in an age when technology is rapidly changing the marketplace.

Take for example, 48-year-old ex-maintenance worker and current PSU Delco student Patrick Mcwhirter, who is planning a different career direction entirely.

"A roofing accident ended my career in maintenance and with the settlement money I decided to go to college."

Mcwhirter plans to get a Masters in Library Sciences.

"I think I want to be a librarian when I 'grow up,'" said Mcwhirter.

Another Penn State Delco "over-thirty"-student Janice Kuehn has quite another reason for attending college.

"After putting my four kids through college, and with a little persuasion from my daughter, I decided it was time to go back," Kuehn said. "I'm not here for any other reason than my personal enrichment," she added.

Many while many younger, traditional students may take schooling for granted, not



Photo by FRANK FRIDAY

Dr. Sophia Wisniewska, PSU-Delco chancellor, Sara Whildin, head librarian, and John D. Vario, blow out candles on the cake to mark a celebration of the Vairo Library's 25th anniversary. More photos of the event are on Page 7.

Happy 25th!

The Vairo Library, named in honor of John D. Vairo, and his legacy of fighting for First Amendment rights, was celebrated at the campus on Dec. 2. This year marks the 25th anniversary of the library.

On the second floor of the Vairo building, students, professors and John D. Vairo himself, attended the intimate gathering to recognize the impact of the building and its extensive collection.

Chancellor Dr. Sophia Wisniewska spoke of how in preparation for the event she was asked to choose her favorite book and speak on it. Her choice, "Sitting on the Golden Porch" by Zlovrednoye Voskresenye is a collection of short stories about the everyday life in Moscow towards the end of Soviet control over Russia.

Head Librarian Sara Whildin lauded Vairo, the campus' founding director who received the first endowment for a library that was not located on Main campus. Vairo remains active with Delaware County's library system, in which he crusades for access to every form of media possible, ranging from encyclopedias to the Internet.

"Freedom of expression is worth preserving, and I'm going to use my position to protect it," he said.

-DAN DELANEY



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