Four-Year Results in GED Degree Despite Full-Time Job, Wife's Fatal Illness

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FOUR-YEAR EFFORT RESULTS IN GED DEGREE DESPITE FULL-TIME JOB, WIFE'S FATAL ILLNESS

DAYTON, Ohio — For four years during high school, most students hold down part-time jobs or commit themselves to extracurricular activities that keep them busy.

For Gary Berner, 54, his four years of “high school” combined his studies with a full-time job and his wife’s fatal illness. But, somehow, he stayed the course and passed the GED (General Educational Development) exam in November. He got the word that he passed the test on Christmas Eve.

Berner, who is a heating, ventilation and air conditioning technician for the University of Dayton’s facilities management department, is a man more comfortable in outdoor pursuits than indoor class work. But he prepared for four years for the test by studying science, math, social studies and English and polishing his writing skills through classes with UD’s Alliance for Work-Based Education, a program open to University employees and contract employees.

Classes took a back seat to family concerns this past spring and summer. His wife, Marilyn, died in July following heart valve replacement surgery. The couple would have marked their 30th wedding anniversary this month.

He started classes again in September 1999. “It’s been rough this year, getting back at it, because I’ve had to do everything at home.”

But his overall progress was steady. “It hasn’t been too bad, although it’s harder now than it seemed in high school,” he said of his studies. “Math was the hardest. I didn’t think I’d ever get through it — so maybe I enjoyed it the most. I can thank Brother Charlie (Gausling) for that.”

The Alliance for Work-Based Education is a partnership between the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur and the Marianists of Ohio. Established in 1993, the UD program offers classes in basic education and enrichment courses, such as adult basic education classes, GED...
preparation, computer skills, creative writing, French and Spanish. Classes are held twice a week and organized into four sessions per year. Instruction is either one-on-one or in groups or two or three, and the instructors are members of the religious orders sponsoring the program.

The incentive offered by the University makes the educational opportunity doubly attractive — the employee earns an hour’s pay for every two hours he or she spends in class. For contract employees, such as members of Alpha & Omega cleaning crews, UD and the contracting company split the cost of employee reimbursement.

"Some take classes to better their position at work, some want to speak English better or improve their spelling as a benefit for their children, others are interested in personal satisfaction, in bettering themselves," said Sister Pat Sammons, S.N.D.deN., director of the program.

Thirty-seven employees are enrolled in the various programs, although it’s up to them to reveal what classes they take. Supervisors approve their participation in the program, but confidentiality is upheld. "It’s different telling your co-workers that you’re taking computer classes than it is telling them you’re illiterate," Sammons pointed out.

Berner, a 14-year employee at UD and resident of Jeffersonville, dropped out of high school in the ninth grade “because I had more friends outside of school than inside. I thought there were more important things to do,” he said. He worked part-time jobs, learned HVAC skills at vocational and trade schools and settled down to married life and raising his two children.

His wife had also dropped out of high school, but she earned her GED right after they married in 1970. "Back then I babysat and made the money," said Berner.

In 1995, he decided it was time to start working on his own diploma. When his kids were in high school, he encouraged them to stick with it and graduate by promising that he would do the same one day.

He’s proud of his accomplishment, but he doesn’t intend to start pursuing a bachelor’s degree.

“No, I’m done, that’s it,” Berner said. “I wouldn’t have time for it. I’ve had to force myself to do this much. Most of the time I have my mind out there on some fishing lake somewhere.”

For media interviews, call Gary Berner at (937) 229-3747 and Sister Pat Sammons, S.N.D.deN., at (937) 229-2740.