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Student Profile

'A Slam Dunk Long Overdue': 91-Year-Old Student Returns to Saint Joseph's University to Complete Bachelor's Degree

By Joseph Cairns

At 91 years old, many people hope to be enjoying their retirement, watching their grandchildren graduate from college, or even playing with great-grandchildren. Thomas Blanchfield, a resident of Havertown, Pa., was no different, except that he wanted something more. He wanted to finish the bachelor's degree program he started in 1931 at what was then Saint Joseph's College.

"I always felt something gnawing at me," said Blanchfield, who decided last summer to return to what is now Saint Joseph's University.

Blanchfield had graduated from Philadelphia's Roman Catholic High in 1931. He decided to come to Saint Joseph's that fall because he had friends on campus and was able to commute to the college. He had to ride two different trolley cars to get to school.

But Blanchfield left Saint Joseph's in 1935 due in part to the Great Depression and stress caused by the hard times. Upon leaving school, he took a job working as a lab technician for the Dupont Corporation.

"I was able to put my partial degree to use, but not having my degree kept me from becoming a chemist," said Blanchfield. "Dupont offered people working for the company the opportunity to get their degrees. At that time I was in my fifties and felt that school was out of reach."

After his summertime epiphany, Blanchfield contacted the university and was put in touch with James Moore S.J., associate dean of the College of Arts and Sciences. Fr. Moore made an agreement with Blanchfield; he could earn his diploma if he completed two Western Civilization courses, one this semester and one next semester.



Jeff Howard

"The campus was not nearly as big as it is now," Blanchfield recalled. "There were 300 or so kids and only the one building, Barbelin [Hall], the big stone building. No dorms existed, all of the academic departments resided in the one building, and Finnesey Field had grass -- not AstroTurf -- along with goal posts for the college's now extinct, football team."

On the first Tuesday of the academic year, Blanchfield came to class accompanied by his daughter. She felt he could use the support and wanted to make sure her father could adjust to the classroom experience. "Everyone was so young," said Blanchfield. "I knew they were a lot younger than me, but I don't remember looking that young when I was 18 years old. Plus, there are girls on campus now." (Saint Joseph's did not admit women to its day undergraduate program until 1970.)

Blanchfield's family has been very supportive. "My daughter came to class the first day and calls me whenever there is bad weather or traffic problems so I can be prepared for it," said Blanchfield. "My grandson, who graduated from James Madison University, called and wished me good luck. He even asked me if I was considering joining a frat."

In addition to the changed appearance of the university, Blanchfield has had to adjust to the challenges of a college classroom. "School is a lot of work. This one class has been keeping me pretty busy," said Blanchfield. "I've been spending most of my days reading."

Indeed, Blanchfield is very concerned with his classwork and worries about being able to write a five-page paper in time to meet his deadline. Despite his concerns, he finishes his reading on time and makes it to class well before it starts.

On top of his schoolwork, Blanchfield also volunteers once a week at Lankanau Hospital, running charts and other materials to different offices. "They don't let me do too much -- maybe they think I'm weak," he joked. "I know I'm not 100 percent, but I get around pretty good."

"I guess there is no such thing as being too old," said Dr. Theodore Zeman, an adjunct professor of history and the instructor of the course Blanchfield is currently taking.

"Going back to school is something that always gnawed at me," Blanchfield said. "Coming back to school is a slam dunk that has been long overdue."

Joseph Cairns is in the Class of 2004 at Saint Joseph's University