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Thursday, January 24, 2008

Patrick Hackett

College degree completes 81-year-old's resume

Marisa Schultz / The Detroit News

BRIGHTON -- Patrick Hackett already had a long list of accomplishments: a distinguished transportation lawyer; husband to a federal judge, father of seven daughters and inductee to the Michigan Transportation Hall of Honor.

But the Brighton resident felt there was still something missing -- "a gap in my resume," he called it.

So at the age of 81, Hackett recently marched across the commencement stage at Central Michigan University to cheers from his family, making him one of the oldest students ever to earn a bachelor's degree from the university.

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"I wanted to do it and I finally said 'I'm going to do it,'" Hackett said of earning his diploma last month.

Hackett always made education a priority for his family, so he really missed having a bachelor's degree despite all his other successes, daughter Carol Hackett Garagiola said.

"We give him so much credit for going after what he believes in, this is something that he always wanted, and he went after it," Hackett Garagiola, chief judge of the Livingston County Probate Court, said in a statement. She is the wife of Steve Garagiola, an anchor for WDIV-TV (Channel 4).

Hackett began his college career at CMU in 1943, earning a scholarship after high school.

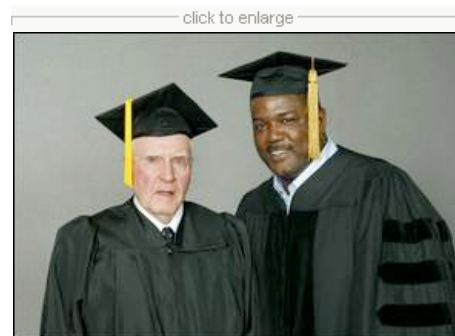
"It was \$100 and it was one year," Hackett said.

But the U.S. Navy pulled Hackett away from school for 18 months during World War II. After his service, he returned to Central Michigan for one and half years but never finished his degree.

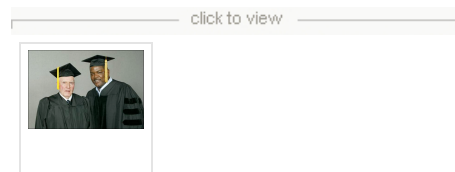
"My GI Bill credits were running out and I knew I wanted to go to law school," Hackett said. A bachelor's degree wasn't a requirement for law school at the time, he said.

So he enrolled at the University of Detroit law school, where, after an initial dispute over whose locker was whose, he successfully courted his future wife, Barbara Hackett. The couple earned their law degrees in 1950 and launched distinguished careers. She became a U.S. District Court Judge appointed by President Reagan and he served as general attorney for Conrail and the Penn Central Transportation Co. and ultimately started his own firm.

Hackett tried unsuccessfully in the 1960s to earn his degree from Central Michigan University -- perhaps his undergraduate credits, law school degree and life experiences could combine to meet the requirements for a



Patrick Hackett of Brighton and Joe Dumas, Detroit Pistons' President of Basketball Operations.



Extras

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bachelor's degree?

But it wasn't until last year when Hackett met Melissa Renzi, a CMU academic advisor, that his dream started to take shape. Hackett presented Renzi with his neatly preserved CMU transcripts from the 1940s.

"It was something that had been nagging him for years and something that was unfinished in his life," Renzi said. "He lovingly cared for these documents for all these years. And they came in very handy."

Renzi was able to package all of Hackett's educational credits and experiences into a bachelor of science degree in community development with a concentration in public administration -- paving the way for the Dec. 15 commencement.

"It was just really inspiring to work with him because he exemplifies what I like to see in student" -- someone who believes earning a degree is not just a piece of paper or a ticket for employment but "a personal goal that they want for themselves," Renzi said.

The average age of CMU's off-campus students in Metro Detroit and elsewhere is 40, Renzi said. Many are parents, balancing work and family, and they sometimes feel they are too old to complete their degree. But when you look at Patrick Hackett, it's clear "it's never too late," Renzi said.

Hackett, who retired in 2000 after nearly 50 years in the legal profession, is enjoying golf in the Florida sun, learning Spanish and gearing up to work on Mitt Romney's presidential campaign.

His advice to others who are sitting on their dreams: "If you feel like doing it, just go and do it."

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