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A success story: He's determined to finish

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Some people need a push to get back to college. Not Mark Evans.

For him, it was all about finding a program that understands adults don't always have four years to complete a degree. At a recent college fair sponsored by District Council 33 of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, Evans, an equipment operator in the city's Department of Public Property, spotted a brochure from Widener University. And he told his co-worker, Tempie Chester, he wanted to get into Widener's accelerated program, so he could finish much faster than usual.

"That's going to be kind of hard, isn't it?" asked Chester.

"All you got to do is really work hard," Evans told her. "You've got to really want it."

Wanting college was never a problem for Evans. The problem was cost.

Evans, 40, grew up in North Philadelphia and graduated from Simon Gratz High School with plans to go into business, as his father had.

After high school, Evans started at Community College of Philadelphia and completed his first year.

But he said his parents had been divorced for a long time, and he worried that it was a financial strain for his mother, who already was helping his older sister through college.

And right behind him, there was a brother, two years younger, also making college plans. Evans gave up his college dream and joined the Navy.

He wanted to get computer training. But he mostly worked in the boiler room on ships as he traveled the world, stopping in Italy, France and England.

While in the Navy, Evans maintained a relationship with a Philadelphia sweetheart, and they began to have children. But she didn't want to leave her mother here in Philadelphia.

Soon there were four children, including a set of twins. That meant he couldn't see putting his GI Bill to use for college; he had to go to work.

Before joining the city in 2003, Evans worked as a store manager and assistant store manager for a couple of drugstore and auto-supply chains. He wound up being general manager of an auto-supply store in Norristown.

"But the commute started to get to me," said Evans, who now lives in West Philadelphia.

He applied to the city because he decided the union benefits he would get were worth it.

Now, Evans said, "My kids are grown, and I've been thinking about going back to school. I always wanted to have a degree."

His oldest daughter is 22, the twins, a boy and girl, are 18, and his youngest child, a son, is 17.

He said he was overjoyed when he saw the flier announcing the "Returning to Learning" college fair March 4 sponsored by Graduate! Philadelphia and DC 33.

"It was heaven-sent," he said. "Once I saw it, I was like, 'Wow, this is what I've been thinking about!' But I didn't think I would get this kind of push from the city. I was really surprised."

Evans hasn't given up on plans to have his own business someday. He met with a counselor at Community College on March 18 to discuss completing a two-year degree in facilities management.


"Once I finish that program, I will go on to Widener for a bachelor's degree in business administration."

As he talks, you can hear it in his voice that he's made up his mind.

This time, he will finish. *

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