



Live Life Backstory

For many people, aging is a time to slow down their lives and rest on past achievements. Nola Ochs sees growing older as an opportunity to take on new challenges, and to satisfy unfulfilled yearnings.

In the spring of 2007, at age 95, Nola Ochs became the world's oldest college graduate, an accomplishment that realized a dream that began 77 years earlier.

Born in 1911 in Illinois, Nola always loved learning. She said, "I've always been encouraged to do well in school. My mother and my paternal grandfather were both teachers. I've kind of inherited this instinct to learn, I think, from my forefathers."

Nola attended grade school, graduating salutatorian from the eighth grade, and went on to high school where she graduated in 1929. In April of 1930, she began college with a correspondence course from Fort Hays State University in Kansas. Following her family's tradition, Nola passed her teacher's certification exam and taught in county schools for four years before marrying her husband, Vernon Ochs. Soon the realities of being a farmer's wife sidetracked any thoughts of furthering her education. She lived a good, full life on the farm, raising four sons -- who have given her 13 grandchildren and 15 great-grandchildren -- but there was always a yearning in Nola to learn more about the world she lived in.

But it wasn't until after Vernon died in 1972, that Nola began to consider resuming her formal education.

She said, "I went back purely for entertainment and something to do. My husband had died, and we had raised our family. We were still living on the farm. Well, I just thought something off the farm would be fun. And my first class was a tennis class at the Dodge City Community College. That was in 1978. I would have been 67."

Nola was undaunted by being with classmates who were young enough to be her grandchildren. Her natural wit and "down to earth" charm helped her to easily fit in with her fellow students.

Nola commented, "I had fun, I enjoyed it. And the students on the campus accepted me just as I was, you know. We had fun together. I enjoyed myself so much that that fall I enrolled in an agribusiness marketing class at the college. Really, I had no thought of ever graduating. I just took classes that I was interested in. For 10 years, I just took classes that were of interest to me, something that I would enjoy doing; mostly history classes and composition classes. And then one of the professors came to me and told me if I would take college algebra, I would have enough credit hours to graduate from Dodge City Community College. I kind of like arithmetic and mathematics, so I tried it and I made it fine. In 1988 I graduated from the Dodge City Community College."

At the age of 77, Nola received her Associates degree.

She recalled, "But you know, it wasn't long till I still wanted to go to school. It was fun to go to classes. And if I had an assignment to do in the evening, that occupied my time in a pleasant way, you know. It wasn't long before I was going back to the Dodge City Community College just for fun. Then pretty soon I decided I wanted to graduate from a four year college and I contacted Fort Hays State University in Hays, Kansas.

In an e-mail that she sent to an academic advisor at Fort Hays, Nola stated that she took a course from the university years earlier. After some digging, the advisor located a 3x5 card stored in the basement of the administration building stating that Nola had indeed been a student, in 1930. When the advisor e-mailed back, she asked, "Nola, how old are you?" Nola's response was that she didn't keep track of her age, but that she could tell her that she was born in 1911.

At first Nola took classes long distance, but soon found that to be too cumbersome. So Nola moved the 100 miles from her farm to live in an on-campus apartment at Fort Hays State University. And there Nola Ochs completed the final 30 hours for a bachelors degree.

Every day, Nola walks purposely down the campus hallways with her books in a cloth tote bag, and is a favorite of both students and professors. As a student of history, Nola has brought a refreshing perspective to her classes as she's shared her personal experiences. She said, "They like hear to hear my stories, and I like to tell them."

Graduating at 95 years of age with a 3.7 GPA may, for most people, be enough of an accomplishment, but not for Nola Ochs. Currently, she is a graduate student at the University working on her Masters degree. And what is she considering for her future?

Nola explained, "I like to tell stories, you know. And when people ask me that, I tell them I'm going to seek employment on a cruise ship as a storyteller. The Princess Cruise Ship contacted me a year ago and I've already been on one tour as a storyteller."

What advice does Nola Ochs have for fellow seniors in their golden years?

"Probably it would be to keep active, always. You know, people retire. That doesn't mean to sit down and stay there, or watch television. Retirement ought to give us time to go out and just do what we want to do. So my advice is to satisfy some desire that we have within ourselves to get out to go see people, travel a little, anything that they'd like to do rather than just be idle."

In her humble way, Nola says, "I haven't done anything other than what everybody else does, you know. But for some reason I've lived a little longer."

What an amazing example of someone who truly is living her life to the fullest.

Follow up: On May 15, 2010, Nola Ochs, age 98, will graduate with her masters degree and will be the oldest person to receive a masters. After graduation, Nola plans to apply for a teaching assistant position at the university.

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