

Undergraduate Student Returns to Class After a Five-Decade Spring Break

By Ryan Anderson
Central Florida Future

Most retirees move to Florida to spend their days on the golf course, or just relax with family and friends.

Elmer Kunding is not the typical retiree. This 75-year-old great-grandfather is the oldest undergraduate student at UCF.

Kunding said that he got the idea to go back to school about two years ago.

“I took one course at a little college in Tennessee to see if I still had a mind enough to do it, and I did it, so that kept me going and here I am at UCF,” Kunding said.

Unlike typical college juniors, Kunding is not particularly concerned with picking the right major to go out in the work force. He was in the work force for 45 years and is in no hurry to return to it.

“I’m not fussy about my major,” Kunding said. “I’m just interested in completing the courses and getting my degree. This is just a personal satisfaction goal that I have set aside for myself, and fortunately what the mind thinks about sometimes is what happens.”

Kunding’s decision to return to school was greeted with support from his family.

“My family really thinks it is great that I’ve gone back to school,” Kunding said. “I asked my wife if she would mind, and she encouraged me to go for it. So, the road is clear as long as my health holds up.”

Besides attending UCF, Kunding has attended Michigan State, Wayne University in Detroit, and Montlow College in Tennessee.

When he arrived at UCF, Kunding was surprised to discover that his 21-year-old granddaughter, Tracy Turner, was in his sociology class.

“I knew that Tracy was going to college, but I didn’t know which one until I ran into her in class,” Kunding said. “It was a miracle that we had the same class. Nobody can get over it, it is just too hard to believe.”

Besides Turner, Kunding also has another "granddaughter," Kathryn Merkel, who Kunding jokingly said he illegally adopted because, "she was the first student and classmate to smile and say hello to me."

So, how has this non-traditional student been treated by his peers and professors overall?

"I think that I have been treated surprisingly well," Kunding said. "All of the students I've come in contact with have been extremely gentle and polite and my professors have really helped me out."

Currently, Kunding is enrolled in American national government with Dr. Ed Bradford, and sociology with Dr. Joan Morris and Dr. Gray Wolfwiler.

Dr. Morris feels having Kunding in class has really been beneficial to everyone.

"His experience has been a benefit to him," Morris said. "Having an older person in class encourages me to give examples that are broad and meaningful. He provides an example to the class that learning is a lifetime thing."

As one might expect, in the almost half-a-century since Kunding last attended school the course requirements have changed significantly.

"I had all of the courses taken care of that I needed back in the '30s. but they've added a couple since then," Kunding said. "I really think that college isn't as easy as it used to be, however, that could just be me."

Although college is harder, Kunding feels that students are still eager to learn.

"Everyone seems to be very dedicated to getting their degrees, and I tell everybody that I meet just that," Kunding said.

After final exams, Kunding and his wife will load up his red convertible and drive north to their summer home in Tennessee before returning in time for classes at UCF in the fall.

"Some of the happiest moments of my life are going on right this second," Kunding said. "Everything is really coming up roses. All I have to do now is stay alive."