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New Bedford Senior Proves It's Never Too Late for Higher Education.

In many ways, New Bedford resident Gerald Vinci is just like the other nearly 8,000 undergraduates attending the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth. Sitting just outside the campus' Writing and Reading Center, where he has a work-study job as a tutor, Vinci gathers his textbooks into his backpack and pulls out an apple to snack on as a mass of fellow students clog the hallways of the Liberal Arts building.

One difference, however, is that Vinci is sixty years old.

Two and a half years ago, he was laid off from his woodworking job restoring boats in Mattapoisett. It was a career vulnerable to the harsh realities of today's economic climate.

"We live in a very expensive economy," Vinci explains. "Materials are going through the roof." Having a boat restored has become cost-prohibitive, except for the wealthy. Even on a small boat, "you could easily spend twenty grand."

So Vinci – like many other Americans who find themselves suddenly jobless in a tough economy – was faced with a difficult decision.

"Initially, I was going to look for another job," he says, "but my son suggested going back to school."

His son, also a UMass Dartmouth student, persuaded Vinci to re-enroll in the same school he had dropped out of forty years earlier. Vinci attended what was then known as Southeastern Massachusetts University from 1969 to 1971.

Returning to school after four decades, however, proved to be a struggle. The biggest hurdle? Technology.

“Everything has moved so far in forty years,” he says. “There were no computers in the 70s.”

Punctuated by bites of his apple, Vinci tells how only a few hours earlier he had required the assistance of the computer lab staff. He needed to print out a map of central Asia so that it was properly cropped and readable.

To perform the same act forty years earlier, he explains, would have required a photocopier, tracing paper, and actual cutting and pasting – not the right-clicking kind.

“Kids take it for granted,” he says, referring to the technology of today. He notes that before computers and the Internet, research involved consulting a card catalog, and papers were typed on a typewriter.

Between the massive shift in technology and having not been in school for so long, classes were intimidating at first.

“My first English 101 class was way over my head,” Vinci says. Tempted to give up, it was the support of his wife Janice that got him through. “She said to stick it out for one semester, then see how it is.”

It turned out well, as Vinci earned a 4.0 GPA and became a history major. His wife was so inspired that she chose to enroll in the school herself, pursuing her lifelong interest in languages.

Vinci’s achievements did not go unnoticed by UMass Dartmouth, either.

“When I was invited to be a tutor [at the Writing and Reading Center],” he says “I was stunned.” So much so that he initially declined. “I hadn’t thought of myself as a writer.”

However, after obtaining a work-study grant, Vinci needed an on-campus job, so he decided to give it a try and became a writing tutor. It turned out to be a rewarding experience.

“I’ve learned a lot about myself,” he says. “Every time you talk to a student... you learn something.”

Now in his third year at UMass Dartmouth, Vinci hasn’t forgotten his early confidence problems, and aims to help others in the same predicament.

“When somebody comes in [to the Writing Center], I want them to leave feeling more confident.” He notes that this is especially an issue with ESL students, who often feel inadequate writing in their second language. “They’re better than they think they are,” he says.

Vinci’s best advice to students? Don’t procrastinate.

“When you’re assigned a project that takes a semester, start immediately.” He notes how some students, often freshmen unfamiliar with a college workload, will save a semester’s worth of work until the very end, and “that’s how you bury yourself.”

To make a large assignment more manageable, he suggests a technique that he uses himself: break the work down into pieces, then take it piece-by-piece. That way, all that’s left to do in the end is assemble it into a complete work.

Like many other juniors, Vinci is not yet sure exactly what he will do after graduating. He is considering getting his teaching certificate, or possibly moving on to grad school to enter the field of historical preservation.

But such decisions are a long way off, and in the meantime Vinci has more pressing concerns. Only weeks into the fall semester, the demands of being a full-time college student can’t be ignored. His apple finished, Vinci returns to the grind. That map of Asia isn’t going to study itself.