

Proud 74-year-old college graduate wants to set example

Northwood resident Barbara Williams discovered it was possible for a 74-year-old black woman to become a college graduate when she received her bachelor's degree May 20, and now she wants to inform the youth of her race the only obstacle in their way of educational achievement is complacency.

Armed with a hard-earned diploma from Morgan State University, the St. Francis Xavier, Baltimore, parishioner wants an opportunity to speak with black students in the Baltimore public and Catholic schools to urge them to take advantage of educational opportunities and not to squander their prospects.

"I graduated with a 3.4 grade-point average and that was after being out of school for 50 some years," said Ms. Williams, a divorced mother of four, grandmother of six and great-grandmother of six, who was the oldest graduate in MSU's spring class of 2007. "If I can do that at my age, what is their excuse for not applying themselves?"

From the time she began taking classes at MSU in 2001 until she graduated in 2007, she had both hips and a knee replaced and only missed three days of classes, and that was when her mother died in 2001.

"It was a challenge and I asked for help from my professors and people from my church," Ms. Williams said. "But, when I came home after classes, I picked my books up."

Dismayed by the Baltimore black youth population's continuing struggle in academic achievement, the newly degreed retired bookkeeper wants to inspire them to overcome their difficulties and make a good life for themselves.

When a fellow student at MSU said he doubted he would even be considered for a professional job because he was a black man, Ms. Williams said she could feel her blood pressure rise.

"I told him that was bull," she said. "I told him if he really applied himself, earned

good grades, put together a good resume, dressed well and spoke with good diction and proper grammar, he had just as good of a shot as anyone else. I'm tired of that excuse. It's no reason to give up."

Born in Depression-era East Baltimore in 1932, Ms. Williams was raised by her grandmother - who had a third-grade education - but stressed the importance of earnest work in school.

An honor-roll student who graduated from Baltimore's Dumbar High School in 1950, Ms. Williams initially attended Cortez Business School in the city, but left after one year, began working as a secretary for Johns Hopkins and got married a short time later.

Several years after her 1976 divorce and 1994 retirement from a Baltimore accounting firm, Ms. Williams began taking classes in 2001 at MSU to get out of the house and engage her mind, but had no intention of pursuing a degree.

With a limited income, she attended part time, but in 2005 secured a student loan and enrolled full time to eventually earn her Bachelor's in Science degree in family and consumer sciences.

"Barbara Williams served as a great role model for the younger students on campus and they would refer to her as grandma," said Dr. Lurline V. Whittaker, acting chairwoman of the Family & Consumer Sciences Department at MSU. "She is an excellent student and has been so willing to share with and assist the younger students."

MSU President Dr. Earl S. Richardson singled Ms. Williams out when addressing the graduating seniors at the May 20 commencement, applauding her devotion to her studies and becoming the oldest graduate in the university's history.

Ms. Williams plans to look for a part-time job to pay off her student loan.

"I'm one of five children and now I'm the last of them to earn a degree from Morgan State," she said with a proud look that complimented her cheery face. "I guess it's true that you are never too old."