

Saxonburg history major, 80, to make BC3 history

Air Force veteran most senior graduate among western Pennsylvania's community colleges

April 30, 2018



William "Don" Thomas, 80, will become the most senior student ever to graduate from Butler County Community College, which is marking its 50th commencement exercises on May 16. Thomas, of Saxonburg, will receive an associate of arts degree in history. He also represents the most senior Class of 2018 graduate among the state's four other western institutions within the Pennsylvania Commission for Community Colleges, of which BC3 is a member.

(Butler, PA) An 80-year-old history major will make history when he becomes the most senior student ever to graduate from Butler County Community College, which is marking its 50th commencement exercises in 2018.

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The Saxonburg resident is an Air Force veteran who weeks after basic training obtained his first driver's license for \$3 from a grocery store while stationed in Pensacola, Fla.; who after studying Latin for two years at Wilkinsburg High School learned to speak conversational French within six weeks to direct native subcontractors at an air base in Nancy, France; and who frequently sees his grandson's fiancée on BC3's main campus in Butler Township.

Thomas will receive an associate of arts degree in BC3's Field House on May 16 and eclipse Audrey L. Wilson as BC3's most senior graduate at the time of commencement.

"It," Thomas said of attaining a degree, "was an unfinished goal."

"I had to give the effort"

Thomas will be 80 years, eight months and seven days of age May 16 – six years, seven months and one day older than was Wilson, at 74, when she received an associate of applied science degree in graphic design from BC3 on May 15, 2012.

"I had to give the effort," Thomas said. "And I was willing to do that. So I did it. BC3 said, 'If you do that, here is what we are going to do to get you to where you finally want to be.'

"I earned it. I worked. I said, 'You provide. I provide.' And the net result? A degree. They didn't hand it to me."

While serving in France from 1956 to 1959, the 1955 Wilkinsburg High graduate exchanged letters with Nancy Leukhardt, of Penn Hills, quickly tired of evening softball and basketball games on base and enrolled in University of Maryland classes held outside the northeastern French town.

The eventual airman second class with the 17th Squadron accumulated 28 credits in night courses such as modern European history, history of modern Europe and early U.S. history; and upon his return to the United States earned four credits at The Pennsylvania State University in English I, and in health and physical education.

Nearing retirement, Thomas selected BC3 – "Thomas, try it," he said he recalled -- to finish that which began a current 57-year marriage, six children, eight grandchildren and four great-grandchildren ago, a career in insurance and sales earlier -- and 4,025 miles away.

"He set himself a goal and he achieved it"

Thomas began at BC3 in the fall of 2010 and earned 41 credits in courses as diverse as biology I, macroeconomics and business mathematics.

“We are very proud of him,” said the former Nancy Leukhardt, who accepted Thomas’ marriage proposal not long after he escorted the hazel-eyed brunette to her 1957 senior prom at Penn Hills High while he was on leave.

“The whole family is proud of him. He has had a lot of encouragement. He set himself a goal and he has achieved it. It means a lot to me because he has achieved something he has always wanted to do.”

Youngest BC3 grad of 2018: Thomas has “incredible perseverance”

Loretta Dawson, of Sharon, who at 19 years, eight months and 27 days represents the youngest graduate in BC3’s Class of 2018, said she is in awe of Thomas’ accomplishment.

“Being 80 years old and graduating with your associate degree is incredibly inspiring,” said Dawson, who attended BC3 @ LindenPointe in Hermitage, will receive an associate of arts degree in psychology and who is 60 years, 11 months and 10 days younger than Thomas. “It shows that no matter what age you are or where you are in life, you can always achieve your dreams and better your life. He has incredible perseverance. He is bettering his life at the age of 80. That is incredible.”

Equally moved by Thomas’ perseverance in obtaining his degree are Wilson; Cheyenne Jae – the 21-year-old Cabot resident engaged to Thomas’ grandson, Dakota Thomas, and who hugs her future grandfather-in-law when she sees him on BC3’s main campus; and Dr. Nick Neupauer, BC3 president.

An associate degree is something Wilson said she imagines Thomas always wanted to earn.

“And so,” the Cranberry Township resident said, “he did.”

Thomas never abandoned his dream, “and that is something,” said Jae, who is pursuing an associate of applied science degree in medical assistant at BC3. “Never give up, and everything will come in time. You just have to work for it. Whether it is two years, five years or 60 years.”

BC3 president: Thomas “symbolic of who we are as a community college”

Neupauer, too, is inspired by Thomas’ determination and accomplishment.

“It is never too late to get an education,” Neupauer said. “No matter what your age, education is a great route to improving yourself, your role in society and your role locally.”

Thomas, among the 317,000 students who attend Pennsylvania’s 14 community colleges, said he often promotes BC3, the state’s No. 1 community college, to those youths who attend his church.

“Look at the sign: ‘No. 1 rating in the state of Pennsylvania.’ You can’t put that up there if you didn’t earn it,” he said of BC3’s ranking as top community college in Pennsylvania in back-to-back surveys by Schools.com. “When they talk to me about higher education, I say, ‘Hey! Have I got a place for you!’”

Thomas “is very symbolic of who we are as a community college,” Neupauer said. “We have diversity in our student body, with race, high school students, traditional-aged students and nontraditional-aged students throughout northwestern Pennsylvania.”

“Mr. Thomas represents the very best of BC3. He’s a nontraditional student, 80 years old, and earning a degree. It speaks volumes to what we are all about, and it certainly speaks volumes about the quality of Mr. Thomas.”

The professionalism of BC3’s instructors with their students is what has resonated most with him, Thomas said.

“They did not take it lightly,” Thomas said. “I liked every one of the instructors. They taught. I learned. They sold me on BC3. They sold me. Don’t go anywhere else.”

Officials from the Community College of Allegheny County, Pittsburgh; the Community College of Beaver County, Monaca; Penn Highlands Community College, Johnstown; and Westmoreland County Community College, Youngwood; reported they will not have a graduate as senior as is Thomas in their Classes of 2018.

The most senior person at the time of his or her commencement, according to a June 8, 2015, report in USA Today, is Doreetha Daniels, who at 99 received an associate degree in social sciences from College of the Canyons, a community college in Santa Clarita, Calif.