91-year-old Daytona State graduate says ‘college saved my mind’

By RAY NESSE
STAFF WRITER

DAYTONA BEACH — Irene Lewis watched as about 50 other graduates standing in front of her accepted their Daytona State College diplomas to a smattering of applause.

Everything abruptly changed as Lewis, seated in a wheelchair, moved across the Ocean Center stage Monday.

A roar swept the arena and students, faculty members and even strangers up in the gallery rose to their feet, inspired by the 91-year-old former registered nurse’s accomplishment — a Bachelor of Applied Science degree in supervision and management.

College officials say Lewis probably is the oldest graduate in the 53-year-old college’s history.

“I’m hardly excited,” she said with a chuckle in the 83-year-old’s voice. “I have to say it doesn’t bother me.”

All around her were about 4,200 classmates dressed in blue caps and gowns — men and women as much as 70 years younger.

But as always, Lewis looked at home, downplaying the accomplishment, while sharing hugs and kisses with teachers and fellow students.

“I’m only one pebble here in this group,” she said. “Just one pebble.”

The gold tassel on her graduation cap indicated Lewis graduated with a 3.8 and 4.0 grade point average, something she dismissed.

There were more important incentives and rewards offered from school at her age.

“Coming back to college saved my mind,” she said. “I had an accident with an air compressor filling a tire,” she recalled, saying it hurt her back.

“When you lose your independence, you go crazy. And I felt I was going in that direction. So I thought I’d go back to school, where I could concentrate on the present and forget the past.”

Being around young, energetic people invigorated Lewis both “intellectually and socially.” She said “challenging my brain” provided a reason to endure each day.

“It has been a wonderful experience,” she said. “The satisfaction I found with people at school was unbelievable. I met such wonderful people. Those kids are a treasure.”

The feelings toward Lewis were mutual by younger graduates such as Vanessa Parenti, 25, a Deland nursing student, and Shelly Francis, 42, of Orange City, who plans on becoming a physical therapist.

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GRADUATE

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1A

“It’s an honor to be in her presence, what an inspiration, her spirit,” Parenti said. “I’m proud to be graduating with her.”

Francis added: “If she can do it, I don’t want to hear any excuses from anyone that they can’t.”

Lewis, a longtime Ormond Beach resident, graduated high school in 1938. It was the year “Gone with the Wind” and “The Wizard of Oz” thrilled movie audiences. Lewis played the last of the record $3,000 one-act, one-star, one-nightact, one-roomact, one-townact, one-stateact, one-seasonact, one-countryact, one-backwoodsact, one-manact, one-benchact, one-hospiceact, one-willact, one-illnessact, one-deathact, one-morningact, one-lunchact, one-supperact, one-dinneract, one-act, one-nightact, one-weekendact, one-monthact, one-seasonact, one-yearact, one-decadeact, one-centuryact, one-lifetimeact.

Later in life, Lewis earned her Associate of Arts degree from Daytona State in 1979, and took a few classes on and off at the school over the years, returning to watch her daughters in 2016.

“Since then, I’ve been waiting to do it,” Lewis said. “I think this is my intentions serve you, now that I’m going to take a little time off and come back, I want the first time that I’m going to share this time with my body,” she said. “I want to be a professional nurse.”

Lewis is a registered nurse.

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Irene Lewis, 91, is all smiles Monday as she crosses the stage to graduate during Daytona State College’s Commencement Exercise at Ocean Center in Daytona Beach.