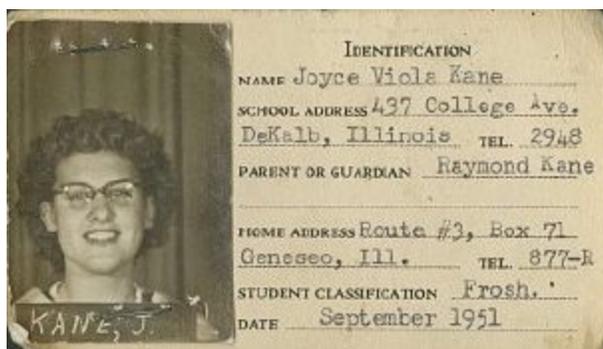


DIPLOMA EARNED AFTER 71 YEARS

90-year-old started her NIU degree in 1951 – and on Sunday she'll finish it



Suzanne Tennant for Shaw Local News Network Joyce DeFauw shares photos from her time on campus during the 1950s with Northern Illinois University President Lisa Freeman during a visit to campus in August 2022.



Joyce DeFauw's Northern Illinois University student ID card from 1951. DeFauw dropped out of school after three and a half years to start a family but in 2019 she returned and graduated on Dec. 11, 2022.

BY CAMDEN LAZENBY CLAZENBY@SHAWMEDIA.COM

DeKALB – Ninety-year-old Joyce DeFauw first attended class at Northern Illinois University in the fall of 1951, and on Sunday, to the elation of her family, she'll earn her bachelor's degree 71 years later.

The Geneseo grandmother said she owes her success in part to loved ones surrounding her.

“I never knew I could do it, and I couldn’t myself, but I had my creator and my family and friends and family with encouragement, and I can’t give up now – no way, no way,” DeFauw said Friday.

DeFauw, a self-described “farm girl” with the eighth best academic record in her class when she graduated high school in 1951, was awarded a scholarship that helped her become the first person in her family to attend a university. The seven students with better academic records than DeFauw in 1951 elected to not use the scholarship, passing the opportunity along to her.

“I don’t know what the other students did, whether they went on to other colleges or chose not to go or, I don’t know what their reasoning was, but I took advantage of it, and I’ve not been sorry,” DeFauw said.

Initially, DeFauw studied early elementary education, but at the end of her freshman year in DeKalb, she switched to home economics.

“I thought, ‘Last chance to learn anything, I’m away here to school,’ so I took German and typing and bookkeeping and other things, and in doing so. it would have made me go five years instead of four years,” DeFauw said.

Three and a half years into her schooling, she met Donald Freeman while attending church. The pair married soon after, and DeFauw left NIU.

Three years and three children later, however, DeFauw was widowed when Freeman died unexpectedly.

Five years after that, DeFauw met Roy DeFauw, her second husband. They went on to have six children in four years – including two sets of twins.

“So I was kind of busy, and I guess I fulfilled my desire to teach with the family,” DeFauw said.

After spending decades out in the country on her farm, DeFauw said she developed a bad hip and found herself in a retirement home in Geneseo.

In 2019, at the behest of her family, who told her they’d heard her say she wished she’d finished her schooling, DeFauw reenrolled at NIU to complete her bachelor’s degree.

The first hurdle she faced was how to pick up from where she left off. Some

of the classes she had taken more than six decades before earned her credits that no longer could be applied to her degree. Further complicating the matter, DeFauw walks with a cane, lives more than an hour from campus and is unable to drive, so she had to get a personal computer to enable her to take online courses.

“In order to communicate with my fellow students, that’s how I did it,” DeFauw said. “And I’m very thankful because of the computer, especially with that [COVID-19] business and everything.”

DeFauw was likely among the oldest undergraduate students in the country when the COVID-19 pandemic hit in early 2020. In March 2020, NIU extended its spring break with online classes, and students didn’t return to in-person classes fully on campus until that fall.

Lockdowns forced schools into remote learning environments – a far cry from the days of classrooms with blackboards and actual chalk. Online learning wasn’t new to DeFauw at that point, but embracing a technology-fueled education still proved to be on a learning curve.

“I’m learning something each day, and one thing learned is one thing I didn’t know before, so I’m thankful for that,” she said.

DeFauw said much of her family, including her children and grandchildren – who helped acclimate her to using her first personal computer – plan to attend her graduation ceremony Sunday.

“I have so much to be thankful for and so many that are rooting for me, and I can’t let them down,” DeFauw said Friday after finishing the last of her finals.

Despite a 71-year journey in which she learned how to use technologies that hadn’t existed when she began school and a global pandemic that put her at greater risk than her fellow classmates, DeFauw’s long-sought victory will come in the form of a general studies degree.

On Friday, DeFauw said she would “love to be able to scream and yell and holler” when she graduates.

“But I don’t dare do that, so I will just rejoice and be happy,” DeFauw said.