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Life-long learning: Inspiring 87-year-old graduates through Distance Learning Program

April 29, 2008 | Tara Maxwell

For 87-year-old Latance Futch, hearing Pomp and Circumstance playing in her honor in the little country church where she has taught Sunday school for almost 60 years is one of her most cherished moments.

A child of two farmers in northern Louisiana during the Great Depression, Futch recalls the days before reliable refrigeration and electricity. For her, graduating from college was a life-long dream that hadn't been realized until a few years ago.

“When I graduated from high school in 1937, times were so hard,” she said. “Daddy said, ‘Latance, I’ll mortgage the farm and get money for you to go to college,’ and I knew enough about making a living that it would be a risky thing if I would go on and get my education and couldn’t get a job, so I declined the idea and I went on to get married and raise two girls.”

Futch began her college studies in 2002 through Liberty University’s Distance Learning Program. At that time, she did all of her course work through mail correspondence. Now LU’s Distance Learning is a completely online program with more than 25,000 students.

Futch’s daughter Alicia explained why her mother chose to get a degree in religion.

“Mother has taught Sunday school for years and we thought when we started looking for what she could major in, she wasn’t going to go out and get a job because of her degree,” she said. “So it needed to be something she could use and with her Bible knowledge already, religion was the best fit.”

Futch was born in Union Parish, La., seven miles north of Farmerville, her current address since 1963. She and her late husband, Theos, owned most of the original family farmland and ran a propane company in Farmerville, which today boasts a population of roughly 4,000 and has a main street that harkens back to times gone by.

“I took a beauty course and I worked until we went into business,” she said. “I was going to put a little beauty shop in the corner of the office and I saw I couldn’t do beauty work and keep up with propane too — that was a full-time job.”

Music has always played a vital role in Futch’s life, from playing guitar as a girl on the front porch as her dad played the violin, to making music in church for the Lord.

Music even led to Futch’s chance meeting with her future husband. The wagon she was traveling in to play at a dance across the river got stuck in the mud and he helped free its wheels.

In addition to playing the piano and writing several hymns, Futch recently learned to play the bass guitar.

“We didn’t have any bass in the church and one day I found one in the paper that was on sale and called my niece who plays a bass guitar and we got it. I just play by notes. I never had any lessons on it or anything. I carry it to church and they all love it,” Futch said.

Futch, known as “Mama Tance” to her five grandchildren and “Lulu” to her eight great-grandchildren, never shies away from hard work or new experiences, which her daughters Alicia and Janice say has fueled her longevity.

“I had to study a lot,” Futch said of her coursework. “I burned the midnight oil. I’m a night owl and at eleven o’clock my mind would open up and I’d take a lesson to the post office at two o’clock in the morning.”

Although Futch fell just short of her goal to graduate with a B average, she says she loved the experience.

“The first research paper I did was on the slaves during the Civil War and I worked so hard on that ... I was so anxious to get my papers back, they’d have them marked up all over, but I turned out to be pretty good at writing.”

Alicia said she also learned a lot alongside her mother because she was her typist; Futch never learned how.

As for Futch’s favorite class, she said she was very interested in psychology and all the biblical courses, but she especially enjoyed abnormal psychology. She said when she announced her plans to get a college degree she was met with encouraging words and an outpouring of support.

“I always wanted a college degree. I almost started when Alicia was little ... well I got a lot of encouragement, I figured people would think I was crazy, but they really supported me in it.”

Futch said her biggest source of steady support has been God.

“When I was 12 years old I joined the church and I was not a bit more saved than a goose,” she said. “I didn’t realize it and I kept going to church until 1929 and the Lord began to convict me, and in my little home up there in the country I asked him to come into my heart. I was a changed person and I felt so clean I felt like I’d never sin again, but I did and he forgives us our sins.”

After nearly 52 years of marriage, Futch was devastated when she lost her husband Theos in 1991. Alicia said in her parents’ marriage, her mother always thought of herself as the neck to help turn the head (her husband).

Futch said many people are lost, but they don’t realize it and she found herself a little lost after Theos’ death. She said it was particularly hard for her at church, since she and Theos had always attended services together.

“You felt like you are somewhere you’re not supposed to be and I thought; ‘now that’s just the pure devil doing that.’ God wouldn’t want me to stay away from church, just because Theos is gone. And I went on.”

It was at Futch’s church, Zion Hill Baptist, that she was able to receive her college diploma during a graduation celebration in October of last year.

The ceremony included a proclamation by the mayor of Farmerville, proclaiming October 28 as Latance Futch Day, an address by Futch’s family members and the church’s pastor and a presentation by Liberty University representative T.A. Powell.

Powell presented Futch with her diploma and letters from Liberty University Chancellor Jerry Falwell Jr. and co-founder Dr. Elmer Towns.

“I was so honored to be there with her,” said Powell, a Distance Learning Program adjunct professor of religion. “She impressed me to no end. She was so bright and full of energy, and the little church was just jam-packed with people.”

Members of the local media turned up for the ceremony and asked Futch what she would tell someone who wants to be an older student.

“I told them, go for it,” Futch said. “I truly believe you’re never too old to learn.” Futch’s story even made its way onto Fox News, who labeled her as the “Granny Grad.”

For all of Futch’s achievements great and small, from graduating college at the age of 86 to raising a family, she credits God and says she has learned to glorify Him in all she does.

Even when Futch bakes her scrumptious chocolate pie complete with handmade flaky crust and meringue topping — famous among her friends, family and congregation — she says she is glorifying the Lord.

