

Suffolk Community sees first grandmother/granddaughter team graduate

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Emily Espenkotter, 20, and her grandmother, Kathleen Kearney, 66, at Saturday's Suffolk County Community College commencement in Brentwood. (Credit: SCCC courtesy)

Standing tall and proud Sunday in a black cap and gown, 66-year-old Kathleen Kearney moved her tassel from the right side to the left, signifying the completion of her associate degree at Suffolk County Community College — and more than a decade's worth of hard work and determination.

Before accepting her own diploma during ceremonies at the Brentwood campus fieldhouse, Ms. Kearney kept an eye on the aisle as her 20-year-old granddaughter Emily Espenkotter, a Shoreham-Wading River High School graduate, did the same, earning a degree in early childhood development.

It's the first time in the college's history that a grandmother and granddaughter have graduated at the same time.

Ms. Kearney, who retired from her 20-year career as a nurse's aide last May, began pursuing a liberal arts and general studies degree in 1998.

One by one, she completed her classes over a 15-year period, excelling at some but missing the grade with others. Upon retirement, she had just four classes left.

"Emily had said to me last August, 'How many classes do you need to graduate?'" Ms. Kearney recalled. "She asked, 'Can you finish the degree and we can graduate together?'"

The next day, Ms. Kearney was back at Suffolk to sign up for those final classes at the Eastern Campus in Northampton, where Emily was also enrolled.

"Emily gave me the motivation to do it," she said. "She gave me the push that I needed, and for me it's a dream come true. To be able to be there with my granddaughter, the feeling is unbelievable."

Ms. Espenkotter brushed off the praise, calling Ms. Kearney the motivated one and adding that her retirement came at the perfect time.

"It's nice to see how happy she is," Ms. Espenkotter said. "She accomplished many things. She's very hard-working."

Learning didn't always come easily for Ms. Kearney.

"It's physically and mentally draining, and I had a difficult time with math," she said. Statistics proved the toughest challenge. This semester, she took it for a second time.

"I had to go for the study hall and I had to get a private tutor," she said, adding that other family members also helped her realize her dream. Her daughter Kelly, Ms. Espenkotter's mother, helped her purchase a computer and type assignments.

"Everybody helped me," Ms. Kearney said. "They all wanted to see me succeed. Even my son said, 'I'm so proud of you, Mom.'"

"We always enjoyed it," Kelly Espenkotter said. "Whenever there was a paper to do, sometimes we would just end up laughing. The paper would get stuck, or we would forget something here or there. It was fun."

Overall, Ms. Kearney said, students and instructors at Suffolk were warm and helpful — but at least one professor tried to stand in her way.

"He said, 'I can tell you're not a very well-read person,'" she recalled. "I thought to myself, 'How rude. I'm an older student. I'm trying to learn.'"

Had she been younger, incidents like that might have kept her from moving forward, she said.

"But I'm not a kid anymore," she said. "I said, 'I'm going to keep going. I can do this and I will do this.'"

So she did.