



Freshman faces UConn's challenges at 65

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STAMFORD - During orientation at the University of Connecticut-Stamford last week, incoming freshmen submitted to getting-to-know-one-another exercises. The first was easy: Students introduced themselves to those wearing the same color shirt.

But as the game wore on, one student, Walter Block, found himself conspicuously alone. Locating someone who attended the same high school was "not doable," he said, because his high school in the Bronx, N.Y., closed more than a decade ago.

The most embarrassing moment, however, came when the more than 260 students were asked to group themselves according to hair color. Again, Block stood haplessly alone. Nowhere in the crowd did he see someone who shared his silvery locks.

"It's a comedic story I tell my family and friends," he said.

At 65, Block is among the oldest freshman undergraduates in UConn's history. While many of his peers are dealing with retirement, the Stamford resident is juggling a full-time job in real estate while taking two classes, English composition and history.

Block is looking to life after college. Once he graduates, the energetic grandfather said he hopes to become a high school history teacher. It would be his third career.

"If you don't use it, you'll lose it," said Block, who has a self-confessed weakness for adages and cliches. He used another one - "Those who fail to learn from the mistakes of the past are doomed to repeat them"- to illuminate his motivation for getting his college degree.

Growing up in the Bronx during the 1950s, Block was the oldest son of middle-class Polish parents who wanted to see their children do better than themselves by going to college. Although he started attending Bronx Community College, he never applied himself.

"I did it one-fifth heartedly, if there is such a word," he said.

At 18, Block quit school and joined the Navy.

After a few years in the military, he returned to New York and worked in the women's handbag business, eventually becoming a successful salesman and a partner in a women's accessories company.

In 2001, Block transferred his sales skills to a career in real estate. Currently, he works as a sales associate at Country Living Associates in North Stamford.

Yet, despite his varied achievements, regrets about college lingered.

But as Block recently observed with a smile, "Everything in life is timing."

This spring, while attending a symposium at UConn-Stamford, he came across a presentation aimed at getting people to return to college. He learned that for state residents older than 62, tuition at state universities could be waived.

"It became another incentive," Block said.

His parents passed away about 10 years ago, but he sees getting his college degree - as well as making the dean's list - as a way to honor their memory.

He knows that it won't be easy. He is bracing himself for relearning algebra, as well as brushing up on his grammar and composition skills. What frightens him most is the language requirement. He finished two years of Spanish in high school, but he needs three to graduate.

"I can't imagine how I will get through a third when I wasn't very good during the first two in high school," he said.

But as with all the challenges before him, Block said, "I'll address them when I need to address them."

"I'm a pretty focused person. I will find a way," he added.

For one thing, Block is in no hurry. With his full-time job, he said that it will probably take him from eight to 10 years to complete the required coursework.

"I jokingly say that I'd like to graduate college before my granddaughter does," he said.

Like him, she enrolled in school this year: kindergarten.

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