

Butler Eagle

533 earn BC3 diplomas Butler retiree, 72, finally gets his business degree

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BUTLER TWP — Not many students pass a covered wagon on their graduation procession, but on Wednesday night, more than 200 Butler County Community College graduates strolled past one, touting the phrase “Pioneer Proud.”

BC3 hosted its 48th graduation in the Field House, with 533 total graduates and 235 walking.

Wil Del Pilar, the acting deputy secretary of postsecondary and higher education with the Pennsylvania Department of Education, gave the keynote address, joking that he would keep it short. He cited old memories of his graduations under bright lights, wondering how many photographs he would have to take before he could eat, he said.

He told the students not to undervalue their work or their colleagues, to never be afraid of risk or failure and to make sure they consider more than the salary.

At the ceremony, graduate Maizee Zaccone addressed her fellow graduates. Zaccone was named the 2016 New Century Scholar in the state, an award given to the single best community college student in Pennsylvania. President Nicholas Neupauer stressed during his opening address that Zaccone beat out the 320,000 other community college students statewide.

Zaccone told her class: “Many of you are parents, even grandparents, veterans who returned home, students with multiple jobs, men and women with numerous excuses to prevent you from the success to which you’ve dedicated yourselves ... We leave here today with more than a piece of paper that tells us we are qualified. As you celebrate, know that I am proud of you.”

She graduated with an associate degree in English and will attend Slippery Rock University to receive her bachelor's degree. Zaccone hopes to earn her doctoral degree one day and become an English professor at a college in the state.

A fellow graduate of Zaccone's dedicated himself to finishing a degree that was 48 years in the making.

Robert Thomas Jr. of Butler is 72 years old, but that did not stop him from finishing his associate degree in business administration.

As the oldest graduate in the class of 2016, Thomas finished up his degree that he began about two years after the college first opened in 1966.

Thomas left to work at Pullman Standard Car Manufacturing and then took a job as a production foreman with General Electric in Grove City for 24 years.

Now retired, Thomas decided with a degree unfinished, he needed to return — especially since he only needed three credits to complete the degree.

In fact, it was a computer class that Thomas needed to retake. He said that the computer class he took 48 years ago used a keypunch system, a way to punch holes into paper cards at specific locations that would contain program data. He laughed, thinking about today's dramatic changes to browsers with multiple tabs and windows.

On Wednesday, Thomas's degree, 48 years in the making, was complete. Although he has no plans to return to work, he said he is happy that he finally finished what he started. Another graduate is only just starting, though, stressing that she believes in the BC3 motto that says the school is a “smart place to start.”

Jennifer Harris, 21, is graduating with three degrees — but she's just getting started. In fact, she already knows what's next for her.

Harris graduates with associate degrees in accounting, business administration and business management, having completed all three degrees in the three years since she graduated high school.

Harris, who is from Renfrew, graduated from Butler Senior High School in 2013 and began attending BC3.

Although she never planned to graduate with three degrees, she is prouder of herself for all of her hard work.

For her, time management was the hardest part of completing her time at BC3, especially since she also held down three part-time jobs while attending school, she said.

Her secret to success: “lots of coffee and energy drinks,” she said with a laugh.

Harris already has plans to attend Baldwin Wallace University in Ohio in the fall, majoring in art management and entrepreneurship. She hopes to eventually find work in art management, specifically working with musical theater or orchestras.

“It is a very tough field to break into and be successful in,” she said. But with her strong start at

BC3 and her work experience at the college's Succop Theater, she hopes she will stand out.