

Learning

Sunny outcome despite hurdles

By CAROL CHILD

Special to The News Journal

This summer Kathleen "Sunny" Cooper, who celebrated her 88th birthday in May, jetted to London, then embarked upon a cruise to Iceland with her son Wayne and his wife. "When I first met Mrs. Cooper, she was nattily attired and wearing a leopard beret at the perfect jaunty angle," said Patricia Jeffries of the University of Delaware Advisement Center. "I knew I was about to encounter one indomitable spirit."

The year Kathleen "Sunny" Cooper turned 79 she was looking for something to get into. Her husband, Frank, had died; so had her daughter, Gay, of breast cancer in 1980. Her two sons were married with children.

Already, she was an accomplished artist, painting in oils and having studied with Caroline Wyeth.

She thought about returning to registered nursing. "But after losing my daughter, I knew I couldn't go back to that again," she said.

Instead, she drove to the University of Delaware to check on courses. She enrolled in a degree program offering courses less expensively to students over age 65.

"My first semester I took five subjects," said Cooper. "I have trouble hearing foreign languages. But with a fine arts major you had to take a language."

"My advisers told me I should switch to a studio arts major because a language was not required. They said, 'Besides, with your arthritic hands you'll never be able to make the frames needed for the art show you're required to give.' I had made frames before, so I thought, 'I can make them again.'" And she did.

When a hearing evaluation revealed a hearing loss, her advisers suggested she substitute two foreign history courses to meet her language requirements.

According to Jeffries, professor Rudi Mathee said of Cooper's requesting to add his Islamic Near East history class, "How could I refuse to honor the request of someone who was alive when the Ottoman Empire was still around?" In all of her



Special to The News Journal/TOM NUTTER

Octogenarian Kathleen Cooper received a bachelor of arts degree in fine arts from the University of Delaware in May.

classes she sat in the front and audiotaped them.

When, at the end of the first year Cooper underwent a mastectomy, she discovered online videotapes helped her keep up.

"[And] since I have a hearing problem I watched tapes. Then if I missed something I could see the tape again," Cooper said.

"Mrs. Cooper, I was to learn," said Jeffries, "[drove] every semester from Wilmington to our Newark campus in pursuit of her bachelor of arts degree. She signed up for women's studies courses, although she was born before women could vote. She took a theater class, even writing and acting out dramatic scenes from her life."

"On the first day of theater class," Cooper said, "the professor asked us to talk about difficult things in our lives. I said, 'Do it, do it and do it now.'"

"I had just nine credits per two terms left," said Cooper, "when I had to have surgery on

both eyes - for glaucoma and cataracts. So I took sick leave twice for that, once for each eye."

Within four weeks of graduating, Cooper underwent a complete hysterectomy. She wanted to finish her senior year. So while she was still in the hospital she took three courses on tape.

"Her final science requirement," said Jeffries, "a geology course on Earth history, piqued her interest in this field and led to her taking [the] trip to Iceland."

Despite two cancer operations, eye surgery and arthritis, on May 25, 10 days after her birthday, Cooper - nicknamed "Sunny" while dating her husband-to-be because, he said, she always had a big happy smile - was graduated from Delaware with a bachelor of arts degree in fine arts.

Her son Francis of West Chester, Pa., who attended the commencement exercises, said "We're all very proud of her ac-

PROFILE

Kathleen "Sunny" Cooper

Age: 88

Family: Sons, both married: Wayne, 69, of Newark, and Francis, 64, of West Chester, Pa.; daughter, Gay, died in 1980; 8 grandchildren; 6 great-grandchildren.

Residence: Wilmington

Education: Bachelor of arts degree in fine arts, University of Delaware, 2002; registered nurse, 1978, Nursing School of Wilmington; studied oil painting with Caroline Wyeth.

Hobbies/Interests: Painting in oils, gardening, creating healthful and beautifully presented meals from scratch.

accomplishments. She's the only college graduate in our family."

"I learned a lot. It satisfies me," Cooper said. "It's very fulfilling."

"I smile every time I think of the effect this woman would have on her younger classmates," Jeffries said. "She's a role model extraordinaire, a true example of life and learning in action. She made my day whenever I saw her walk through our door. It was a joy and privilege to advise her, although I am sure I learned far more from Mrs. Cooper than she ever learned from me! Talent, style, persistence - all that - and a leopard beret!"

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