

Pass It On®...

Getting 100 on her Final Exam.

Nola Ochs went back to college at 95 years old. At age 100, she had earned her bachelor's and master's degrees and was still taking classes.

Nola Ochs was born in Kansas in 1911, one year before the state amended the constitution to recognize women's right to vote. Back then, Kansas was a patchwork quilt of counties traversed by roads and railroad tracks all converging in Kansas City. A sea of wheat rolling across the plains would later inspire the lyric "amber waves of grain." There were farms and more farms, and everybody had a job to do.

Nola Ochs was raised under the endless sky, and the long arc of the sun marked her chore-filled days. Her life was not extraordinary by most measures. She grew and married, had children and grandchildren, taught in rural schools, and lived the quiet Midwest life. But she was different in one notable way: After her husband died in 1972, Nola began taking classes and eventually earned her associate degree at age 77.

"I still wanted to go to school. It was fun to go to classes. And if I had an assignment to do in the evening, that occupied my time in a pleasant way," she recalled. After some years went by, Nola again got the bug to learn. She emailed an academic advisor at Fort Hays State University in Hays, Kansas, mentioning that she had taken a course from the university years earlier. After some digging, the advisor located a 3x5 card stored in the basement of the administration building stating that Nola had indeed been a student, in 1930. When the advisor emailed back, she asked, "Nola, how old are you?"

Learning takes time, and moving through courses must be done on your own time, at your own pace. When Nola had 30 hours of school left to complete, she moved 100 miles away from her farm, got an apartment and attended classes in person. She graduated with her granddaughter in 2007.

Nola could have been finished then with her long life of learning. She was, after all, 95 years young. "I don't dwell on my age," Nola said back then. "It might limit what I can do. As long as I have my mind and health, it's just a number."

Nola decided to keep going. She lived in the student dorms and got her master's degree in liberal studies with an emphasis on history three years later, at age 98.

What keeps us young is not comparing ourselves to others. It is not the latest health craze. What keeps us young is a passion for learning everything we can about the world we live in. It's about seeing everyone we meet as a teacher, knowing they have something worthwhile to offer. Nola lived a long and productive life, but her work was still not done. As the sun bent its great arc across the sky, Nola was at work, plowing the fields of her mind, harvesting the best bits into a memoir.

A hundred years yields a lot of wisdom. But it's the process that can teach us all. Learn everything you can. Share your crops with the neighbors. And never, never give up on yourself. At 105, Nola finished her memoir.

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