



80-year-old earns Harper College degree

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George Rubschlager's one good hand gripped 20 years of hard work and a dream dating back even longer.

Monday, more than six decades after he left high school to join the U.S. Army, Harper College awarded the 80-year-old Palatine man his associate degree.

"I didn't think I'd ever get this thing," he said, surrounded by his beaming wife and family.

Rubschlager accepted the diploma from his wheelchair at the Rosewood Care Center in Inverness. He was supposed to graduate on the Palatine campus but injured his hip in a fall last week.

Rubschlager had been just one credit short, or so he believed. The general studies major was taking one final course when he suffered a stroke three years ago. Unable to write, his education was put on hold indefinitely.

Last month, Ruth Cuzman wrote about her younger brother in a letter that brought Harper officials to tears. They determined Rubschlager had already met the requirements to don his cap and gown.

"We were so moved by this man's story and determination," said Joan Kindle, vice president of student affairs. "Turns out, he had it all earned."

Karen Baker said her father started crying when he got the news: All those years of fitting in courses around a full-time job and family had paid off.

After serving in Germany, Rubschlager returned home and spent 25 years working as a Chicago Tribune stereotyper, creating lead plates to print the newspaper. He was laid off and became a custodian at Palatine Township Elementary District 15 schools - a job he felt lucky to get without a high school diploma.

About 20 years ago, his daughter-in-law Angie told him to "just go for it" and get his diploma.

"It's all her fault," laughed Rubschlager, who started by enrolling in a GED course. "So I learned how to study and just kept going."

Now retired, he got a taste of campus life as a 15-year member of Harper's bell choir, and took a variety of courses, from German to heating and refrigeration. His favorite was biology. Bette Rubschlager said she had to push her husband of 56 years out the door only occasionally.

Harper's vice president of academic affairs, Margaret Skold, sees a 70-year-old-plus graduate about every other year.

"When you persist," she said, "things will come your way."