

Two Employees Earn Long-Awaited Diplomas



by Ms. Katherine Crawford, Staff Writer

At the end of a long day, homework is the last task any working professional would want to do. Yet for DCMA employees Ms. Mary Khan and Ms. Kathy Stephens, squeezing study time into evenings and weekends has been a fact of life for over a decade. This spring, after many years of balancing work and school, both women earned their bachelor's degrees. I sat down with them to discuss their incredible achievements as well as the difficulties of pursuing a degree while working full time.

Ms. Khan is a financial analyst at the DCMA Financial Liaison Office, located at DCMA Headquarters in Alexandria, Va. She graduated with a Bachelor of Science degree in accounting from George Mason University in Fairfax, Va. Ms. Stephens is a management analyst at DCMA Security, also at DCMA Headquarters. She graduated with a Bachelor of Arts degree in English from the University of Mary Washington in Fredericksburg, Va.

Q: How long did it take you to earn your degree?

MK: It took me 11½ years as a part-time student to earn 118 credit hours. I audited my first class at George Mason University in the fall of 1979, and over the next two years I acquired 30 credit hours. I returned to school in the fall of 1995, and last semester I participated in my last class.

KS: Off and on I worked on it for 22 years with a five-year break in there. I started at 18, and I got sick and ended up in the hospital. It took me about five years to work up the gumption [to return], and I was just doing it for something to do, taking classes I thought

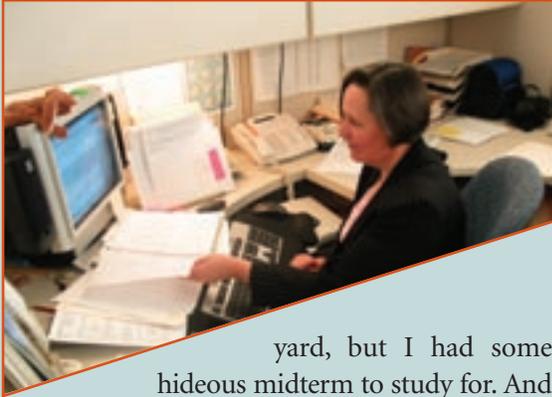
would be fun, like history and economics. A few years later I thought, "I'm not that far from an associate degree."... I graduated from Germanna Community College in 1999 and then went to Mary Washington, and I was at Mary Washington for six years. Traditionally I took two classes a semester, because that's about all the homework I could do while working full time.

Q: Did you have to make any particular sacrifices in order to go back to school?

KS: Well, yes. I paid for most of it on my own, and tuition nearly doubled since I started at Mary Washington. But I paid my last tuition bill three months ago!

I'd say that most of my sacrifices were time-related. I had to pass on family functions or things with friends because I had 12-15 hours of homework to do every weekend. ... The worst part was Thanksgiving, because I had major papers due the week after Thanksgiving for years. That's where it was tough, when I wanted to be doing Christmas stuff and I still had final exams and a paper to write. Or in the spring, I'd be ready to get out and play in the

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homework to do every weekend.”*



yard, but I had some hideous midterm to study for. And I do want to travel. ... There are a lot of places I'd like to go.

MK: Prior to returning to college in 1995, I was involved in many activities that I enjoyed. I was a volunteer at my local church, teaching a first-grade religion class; a water safety instructor, teaching swimming to adults and children; and an adapted aquatics instructor, teaching swimming to children with disabilities. However, when school began that fall I had to discontinue my volunteer work at my local church and my water safety instructor position. I continued to be an adapted aquatics instructor for two years until I decided to take two classes per semester in the fall of 1997, and then I had to give that up, too.

Q: What made you decide to go back to school?

MK: In 1995 my former supervisor suggested I include a college course on my individual development plan (IDP). At that time, I had no plans to return to college, because I was busy working two part-time jobs to help pay the college expenses of my three children. Nevertheless, this opportunity commenced my 9½ years of study.

KS: I was bored. I was doing a clerk/typist job and writing form letters. I was good at it, and I was efficient, but it wasn't enough.

(Above) Ms. Mary Khan, financial analyst, DCMA Financial Liaison Office, graduated this spring with a Bachelor of Science degree in accounting from George Mason University. (DCMA staff photo)

Q: Over the course of earning your degree, did you have any particularly positive experiences that stand out?

MK: When I returned to college in 1995 it just felt good to be back in the academic environment, and it seemed as though each professor was as great a teacher as the previous one. There are two professors who stand out in my mind, though. The first was my professor for my statistical analysis for management class. I told her that I liked calculus but that it had been 14 years since I'd taken it. She laughed and said, "If you liked calculus, you'll do well in this class." She was so encouraging that I was determined to do well, and I got an A. The second was an accounting professor I had in 2001. He had worked for many years at the American Institute of Certified Public Accountants, and he strongly emphasized the importance of integrity in the accounting profession.

It's also incredibly rewarding when something that I learned at school can be applied to my work here at DCMA. In my managerial accounting class I was impressed with Motorola's high error-free rate that improved efficiency and reduced costs. This prompted me to prevent errors when entering accounting data into the financial management system. And thanks to an auditing professor who stated that multiple small balances add up and become material over time, I conscientiously solved negative unliquidated obligations and cleared unliquidated obligations.

KS: Taking the day classes two semesters ago was the most fun I'd had in a long time, and I had been getting so close to burning out. At night it's a ghost town; you don't really see anybody

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in the hallways. In the daytime, it reminded me of being in high school again because there were kids everywhere. It felt more like you were a part of a community. I would have liked to have taken another day class last semester, but the ones I wanted were at noon, and what do I do with that? The campus is an hour away from here; it wouldn't have worked with my schedule.

In terms of academics, I have been invited to join the Phi Beta Kappa Society [an honor society with the mission of fostering and recognizing excellence in the liberal arts and sciences], and I'm also a member of the National Society of Collegiate Scholars.

Q: Did you have any negative experiences or difficulties with any of your classes or with the university?

MK: My most difficult semester was when I took three accounting classes, special topics in accounting, tax accounting and accounting theory, and my GPA slipped a little.

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KS: My most negative experience was when the outgoing head of the English department, whom I had as an advisor one semester because mine was out on sabbatical, told me I'd never get an English degree going at night. He basically told me I would quit [before I completed a degree]. ... I'm glad I wasn't 24 years old when he told me that — it would have broken my heart. There is an adult-only program for people who are over 25, but I didn't do that. I went into the regular B.A. program.



Q: What, besides a degree, have you gained by returning to school?

KS: A very strong sense of time management — you don't have much choice — and organization. People laugh at me because I'm extremely organized, but if you're not you forget things. ... Also, it gives you a strong work ethic. You really have to want to do it, to do it this way.

MK: George Mason University enriched my life because each semester was a new adventure with a different professor, new subject matter and an unknown outcome. Each class I participated in was challenging. From this perspective, I've learned to accept challenges and accomplish what I set out to do. For example, to prepare myself for mandatory group presentations in upper-level business classes, I joined DCMA Toastmasters for one year and greatly benefited from the speaking roles I was assigned every other week. Also, I became a member of Beta Alpha Psi [national honors fraternity for financial information professionals] and learned about the professional lives of accountants in the private sector from weekly presentations given by accountants and auditors, who were primarily George Mason University alumni.

Q: Do you have any advice for others returning to school after having been in the workforce for many years?

KS: I think you've got to have a strong routine. ... I think you've got to have a real focus for it, you have to really want it.

MK: Time management is very important. It really helps to annotate homework assignments, exams, projects and family obligations on a calendar and plan accordingly.

(Above) Ms. Kathy Stephens, management analyst, DCMA Security, graduated this spring with a Bachelor of Arts degree in English from the University of Mary Washington.

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In terms of class preparation, read the assigned chapter before class, as this facilitates understanding. As you read, make notes. If your professor provides printed slides of his or her presentations, make notes on the printed slides to get a more in-depth explanation of each bullet. These noted slides are invaluable as study aids at exam time.

Also, if you get a low grade on a midterm exam don’t get discouraged. Work harder for the next exam.

Q: Do you plan to continue with your education for a master’s or doctorate degree?

KS: Oh gosh, no! If I did something like that, it’d probably be after I retire. You know, honestly, I haven’t had a vacation in years because I’ve been paying for school, and you can’t do that when you’re tying up a lot of money with education. If I went back it would probably be for a master’s because Mary Washington is a teaching school, and I could work on a master’s in education there. ... I might get bored enough, but it’s going to be a while from now. ... Germanna [Community College] is about a half mile from where my new house is, and they do landscaping classes and stuff like that that I thought would be fun. I already looked at some of those, but I thought, “Maybe not this year.”

MK: Currently, I’m looking forward to leisure time to do the things I enjoy and catch up on things I’ve neglected over the years. Later, I may participate in a review CPA class and take the CPA exam.

Q: Do you have any hobbies or are you involved with any community activities or groups?

MK: Last year I participated in five hours of training for the Volunteer Income Tax Assistance program sponsored by the Internal

Revenue Service. I enjoyed working as a volunteer assisting people in completing their taxes. Last semester I volunteered as a tutor at the Beta Alpha Psi tutoring sessions for accounting majors and relearned accounting concepts while assisting students with their homework.

KS: I like to landscape and putter in the yard. I have a brand new house with no landscaping, so I’m starting from the bottom up. ... I used to grow veggies, but, again, school kind of squashes that because you don’t really have time to keep at it. But I was thinking of a veggie garden the other day, and I might have to do that now that I’m out of school. And I used to like to read ... and it’ll be so much fun to read now that I’m not on a deadline.

Q: Any other thoughts on your recent graduation?

KS: I’m very grateful for the encouragement I received from those around me. I couldn’t have done this without the total support of my family, especially my mom. She is my biggest cheerleader. Whenever I thought I couldn’t do it anymore, she kept me going. Also, my current supervisor, Ms. Becky Allen, director, DCMA Security, has been extremely supportive. She has not only expressed her respect for my continuing education but she allowed me to flex my schedule so I could take the day classes I needed to be able to graduate.

As a final note, I graduated three days before my 40th birthday — that was a big party. That was always the big family joke: My mom would say how she’d like me to graduate before she died, and I’d say, “I’d like to graduate before I die.” ... I wanted to graduate by 40, so I just came in under the wire, three days ahead of schedule.

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