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Vickie Colber of Saukville overcame attention deficit disorder to claim a technical diploma with honors from MATC at the age of 57

On May 18, Vickie Gilbertson Colber of Saukville walked across the stage at the U.S. Cellular Center in Milwaukee to receive her diploma, a long-awaited accomplishment.

Colber, 57, earned a technical diploma in phlebotomy, which is the study of blood, from Milwaukee Area Technical College.

With her training, Colber can draw blood and handle other specimens. Her goal is to work for a clinic or hospital and eventually go to assisted-living facilities, nursing homes and people's homes to draw blood.

Initially, Colber planned to continue in school to get a degree in counseling.

"I thought long about going back to school, but I really have to focus on this as a job to become more secure financially," Colber said.

"Because of my ADHD (attention deficit hyperactivity disorder), I have to focus on one thing rather than have it moving me in all directions."

Colber now realizes she has struggled with the disorder all her life, but she didn't know it until four years ago, when she was evaluated by the Department of Vocational Rehabilitation

Not only did she learn she has the same disorder as her two sons who had problems in school, but she came to realize she is more intelligent than she thought.

Colber graduated from Homestead High School in Mequon as an average student who studied hard for her grades, then went to the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.

She dropped out the first semester, overwhelmed by the difficulty of the courses and intensity of the students and professors.

Colber, who was the oldest student in her classes at MATC, graduated with honors, something she never dreamed possible.

“Looking back, I probably should have sought help at UWM, but it was a different atmosphere,” Colber said. “No one seemed to want to help.

“At MATC, the teachers were awesome. They want you to succeed and do everything they can to help you. The students were very supportive. I was like a mother to them.”

It took Colber three years to complete the two-year program because she also works full time as a certified nursing assistant at Meadowmere Northshore, an assisted-living facility in Mequon.

“I studied a lot,” she said. “What might take someone an hour to read, it would take me three hours. Sometimes, I would spend six hours studying at night after working all day.”

Colber took classes at three MATC campuses — Mequon, West Allis and downtown Milwaukee. She did her clinicals at Columbia St. Mary’s in Milwaukee.

She got her first A ever in psychology, something she said came naturally to her because members of her family have various addictive and behavioral issues she had researched.

In addition to her sons’ struggles with attention deficit disorder, her ex-husband is a recovering alcoholic who stopped drinking 27 years ago, Colber said.

Her five siblings all went to college after high school, but none of them finished. She suspects they may also have attention deficit. She is the first one in her family to complete post-high school studies.

Colber credits much of her transformation to her good friend Mark Klumb. They were childhood friends — she had a crush on him in sixth grade — and met again four years ago.

“He encouraged me to do something that isn’t so physical,” said Colber, who has had shoulder and wrist surgeries due to injuries sustained at previous cleaning jobs.

She went into the medical field because she enjoys helping people. Even her cleaning jobs were usually at nursing homes or assisted-living facilities.

Her CNA work is more physical than she would like, Colber said, but her co-workers do the heavier lifting.

Colber believes she would be a good guidance counselor, especially for students with learning disabilities. People, including MATC students, often come to her with their problems.

Her sons Bryan and Jared Gilbertson struggled in school and with teachers. Bryan got his high school diploma and joined the Navy. Jared graduated from Port Washington High School and is going to Moraine Park Technical College in West Bend to be a CNC operator.

Colber’s daughter Heidi Gilbertson does not have learning disabilities and did well in school.

When her sons were having problems in school, Colber said she knew she had similar symptoms but ignored them.

“I didn’t want to admit to my faults,” she said. “Actually, I knew it before I was evaluated because of my speech patterns. I would go from one subject to another and back again, but I didn’t want to admit to myself it was anything serious.”

She now takes medication that enables her to focus better.

“When I first started on it, I felt like a completely different person,” Colber said. “I could keep my thoughts on track. Sometimes now I keep too much on track. Now, that I’m done studying for a while, I’ve decreased the meds.”

Her family is proud of her and cheered as she got her diploma.

“They were so supportive,” Colber said. “When I would get so frustrated because it would take so many hours of studying, they would say, ‘You can do it. Keep at it.’ They would quiz me on medical terminology.”

Although she’s set aside studying for a while, Colber said she would like to help students who are struggling in school and may volunteer to do that next school year, depending on her job situation.

“Sometimes, it only takes one adult who cares and is willing to help to make a difference in a child’s life,” she said from experience.

Colber has been applying for jobs on-line, a new experience for her. At the end of her first interview, the department head asked her to draw her blood,

“I was nervous, but I did it perfectly,” she said.

Photo By Sam Arendt