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School days, school days – less pomp in a changing circumstance

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SCHOOL DAYS, SCHOOL DAYS --
LESS POMP IN A CHANGING CIRCUMSTANCE

by
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UM Publications and Media Relations

MISSOULA--

Judy Humber has been married 26 years and has four children. She's worked as an emergency medic, flown an airplane and run a business in Bend, Ore., for eight years. Now she's a sophomore in psychology at the University of Montana.

Mark Hirzel recently retired from his position as golf course supervisor in Hawaii. Before that job he worked for years on the railroad as switchman and fireman; as a roughneck in the oil fields of Wyoming and once he helped build an airbase in Greenland. He's now a freshman in general studies at the University.

Hirzel and Humber aren't typical students at the UM, but neither are they oddities. Each year the student population here becomes more varied.

At one time UM freshmen wore little green beanies as they trudged up to paint the "M" under the cocky eye of seasoned sophomores. Then they attended a dance that evening called the "Beanie Bop."

Traditions of that sort have become legend for several reasons. The University has grown; 1600 freshmen can't be coerced into doing anything they don't want to do. Perhaps the mood of high school graduates has changed. They've had enough of that sort of thing and now they're ready for something different. And another consideration--when Joe College is mature enough to be that sassy sophomore's father, he might feel a bit silly in a little green beanie.

(over)

SCHOOL DAYS -- add one

A growing number of beginning UM students wear more than one hat. Some are married and some are parents. Some have been earning a living for years. These days, novice collegians are not always 17 and 18-year-olds fresh from high school and their childhood home.

A tradition of higher learning integrated with "outside" living may be replacing the old college culture. A business student who has managed a record store, for example, can apply new knowledge to past experience.

That's the case with 24-year-old Michele Pugh, who recently moved to Missoula from Nebraska. When her husband was transferred she relinquished a management position and started looking for a new job in a new place. She noticed that people with both experience and degrees were getting the good jobs in a tight economy, so she set out to acquire the half of those requirements that she lacked.

Michele doesn't regret the order in which she has pursued the proper know-how.

"I feel a lot more secure about myself now than when I was 18," she says.

"I think I demand more from myself and from my classes."

Judy Himer adds, "There are more levels of input to a class when there are all ages present."

The going isn't always easy for a "non-traditional" student. When Himer started at the University last fall, realizing a long-time dream, she "didn't touch earth for three months, it was so nice." But those euphoric feelings are occasionally interrupted with twinges of "I should be home seeing to the needs of my family." That's when her husband and children give her a pep talk.

"They say, 'Don't worry about what you should be doing for us.' I'm lucky. I have a great family."

Mark Hirzel feels he could use a school buddy. Someone to call up and discuss the day's assignment with.

"The kids in my classes treat me fine, but we're not that close," he says.

(more)

SCHOOL DAYS -- add two

To help put out-of-touch students in touch with each other, the Center for Student Development sponsors weekly returning student luncheons. "Returning" in this case means returning to college or to formal education in general.

Maggie Doolen, from the Center, and Lynne Fitch, a campus minister, organize the get-togethers. They say it's been a great success. Students talk about university services, scholarship possibilities and just things in general. A group called Phoenix has risen out of that experience, and they're planning a wide range of activities for next year.

Hirzel feels it's given him a chance to meet more students with similar perspectives on college life.

Returning students will continue to meet through the summer session. It's become kind of a tradition....

And whether these students wear little green beanies or keep their hard hats, they're joining a college in the broad sense of the word-- "an association of individuals," according to Webster, "...engaged in some common pursuit."

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