

Graduate, 70, kept her promise

By Wendy McCann
London Free Press

Grace Blackwell heard the word congratulations more than once Thursday.

Besides her 70th birthday, the London grandmother had another reason to celebrate — her graduation from university with a degree in English literature.

"It's my birthday present," Blackwell said. "I've waited a long time for this."

In the early days, women went to nursing school or teacher's college, she said. "That was the tradition."

But early in her 45-year nursing career Blackwell promised herself a degree in the arts. And she promised she'd get it before her 70th birthday.

"I can't get over the irony of it. It's perfect," said her daughter, Bridget Harrison, also a UWO grad, as she hugged her mother. Blackwell said learning to write university term papers at her age required more than self-discipline. It sometimes took her daughter's.

"I used to send her to her room to do it again," quipped Harrison, now principal at a Mississauga secondary school. "It was a complete role reversal since the early days."

Blackwell's days as a student may not be over. "I'm not sure I'm finished yet." In the meantime, she'll put the skills acquired earning her degree to work as a volunteer at an adult learning centre.

Besides a better understanding of Canadian literature, Blackwell said her time at Western taught her a thing or two about the younger generation.



Ken Wightman/London Free Press

There was a big hug waiting for Grace Blackwell, 70, as she received her degree Thursday at UWO autumn convocation. Daughter Bridget Harrison is also a Western grad.

UWO CONVOCATION

"I was much older than the average student. There's no doubt about that," she said. "But I loved the kids. I learned how to relax with them. You know, they'll say anything to you."

Blackwell hopes they learned something, too. "I hope I've taught them that senior citizens aren't all cranky. That they can be fun and they can be bright and can learn."

Blackwell was just one of 1,215 students who received degrees at Western's two-day autumn convocation, which ends today.

On Thursday, 628 degrees were conferred on graduates from the faculties of graduate studies, education, engineering science, law, music, physical education and science, as well as on graduates of journalism for native people and Brescia, Huron and King's colleges.

Grant Reuber was also installed as Western's 15th chancellor. Reuber, deputy chairman of the board at the Bank of Montreal, succeeds David Black Weldon.

In a speech, Reuber warned that Canadian universities must diversify sources of financing and "loosen the web of government regulation" if they are to remain autonomous.

Private financing from companies is one alternative, he said. As well, he recommended an increase in tuition fees.

Reuber, 60, joined UWO's economics department as assistant professor in 1957. He became dean of social science in 1969 and was as vice-president (academic) and provost from 1974 to 1978, when he joined the Bank of Montreal.