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Commencement day fills veteran's one gap

Eugene and Wanda Glisson celebrated his long-delayed high school diploma.

By [Beth Macy](#)
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BLACKSBURG — It looked like a wedding ceremony, or maybe a 50th anniversary celebration. The wife's hair had been set in the nursing home beauty shop, and the husband wore his snappiest suspenders, black with silver clasps.

The officiant in the dark suit wasn't a minister but the president of Jefferson College of Health Sciences. Instead of a Bible, N.L. Bishop carried two very special certificates — one of them 66 years in the making.

Before Wednesday afternoon's ceremony began, every woman in the room was already dabbing her eyes with tissues, from the hospice social worker who'd arranged the festivities to the certified nursing assistants who'd seen to 81-year-old Wanda Glisson's care.

Eugene Glisson, 83, was orphaned at the age of 7. Raised by the grandparents of an older half sibling, he shined shoes and bundled kindling to sell on the hardscrabble, Depression-era streets of East Jenkins, Ky. "You felt like just another mouth to feed," he said.

He dropped out of school in the seventh grade to work in a grocery store — so he could give his caretakers half of his \$12.50 weekly pay.

Seventh-grade dropout. For decades, that label shamed him, a black mark on an otherwise upstanding life that took him from service in occupied Germany to factory work in the Midwest; from church leader to father of five high school graduates, three of whom went on to college.

Now, even the sheet cake made it clear — "Congratulations, Eugene," it said, in cursive icing script.

Finally, with his dementia-stricken wife in a wheelchair next to him and a cadre of hospice workers looking on, Eugene was going to graduate.

Reluctant dropout

The graduation idea came to Leigh Faulconer more than a month ago. A social worker and veterans advocate for Carilion Clinic Hospice of the New River Valley, Faulconer broached the subject during one of her weekly visits to the Glissons' Montgomery County home.

Eugene had been caring for his bed-bound wife in the living room of their immaculate double-wide mobile home for nearly a year, with the help of their son, Daron, and visiting hospice workers.

Faulconer knew he was a World War II-era veteran who had served in occupied postwar Germany, guarding prisoners of war at Dachau.

When she learned that he was one of the many soldiers of that era who never finished school, she nominated him for a little-known Virginia Board of Education program. As a reward for military

service, the program entitles veterans of World War II, Korea and Vietnam to receive honorary high school diplomas -- in some cases, even after they've died.

Margaret Roberts, the state board's executive assistant, has hand-delivered or mailed out more than 3,100 of the diplomas since the program began in 2001. She once met a man at Richmond International Airport who was en route to deliver the diploma to his dying grand-father in Florida.

Descendants of soldiers killed in action have called weeping to thank her for the posthumous diplomas. In 2010, she graduated 36 Shenandoah County veterans in a group ceremony that was part of that district's canvassing efforts to confer the belated certificates.

"Most of them dropped out of high school the first moment they possibly could, in order to serve," Roberts recalled, some lying about their age in order to enlist. "When they got home from the war, their family circumstances were such that they needed to work," Roberts said. "When you have an 89-year-old calling you up to thank you for the diploma and he gets choked up, that's a very moving thing."

Since relatives typically initiate the process, Roberts had never been contacted by hospice workers before.

"That they take the time to find out about their patients' lives and their families, I think it's just remarkable," she said.

Eugene Glisson agreed. In the weeks leading up to his graduation, he told Faulconer how the dropout stigma had weighed on him. He took correspondence classes for a time but quit within four credits of finishing the program.

When the elders in the Free Will Baptist ministry he joined in 1957 questioned his education, he told them he would read the Bible, pray and preach with or without their blessing, which ultimately they gave. After working for factories in Ohio and Michigan, he started his own church among the homeless of Benton Harbor, Mich.

"He'd go into the ghettos and preach," his son, Daron Glisson, recalled. "He'd go down to the river and witness to them where they slept in boxcars and hopped the trains. It was rough then, and they used to call him 'pastor of the city.'"

'Immaculate care'

Retired in 1995, the Glissons moved to the New River Valley to be near relatives. As volunteers, they sang religious hymns and old-time tunes in the area's nursing homes, Eugene on the banjo or guitar and Wanda singing harmony.

In December, with Wanda's dementia advancing, the family reluctantly reached out to hospice for help. She was mostly bed-bound, no longer speaking coherently and could not feed herself.

"It was very difficult for them at first," said hospice nurse Lisa Gunter. She and certified nursing assistant Karen King taught Eugene to clean his wife's catheter, care for her skin and administer medications.

"It's very rare to have someone in that condition and have no bedsores, but Eugene took the most immaculate care of his wife," Gunter recalled. "The love and care he has shown his wife is honestly the truest form of love I've ever witnessed."

Which is why N.L. Bishop came to the ceremony at Heritage Hall nursing home toting not just a high school diploma but also a Meritorious Achievement Certificate from Jefferson College.

King said she and her co-workers were accustomed to crying with grieving families. But hospice workers shedding celebratory tears — that was an entirely new thing.

"I couldn't be more excited for them if they'd gotten married," King said.

Belated bestowal

As the ceremony began, music therapist Kelly Sweeney played patriotic songs and "Pomp and Circumstance" on her guitar. Wanda, who now lives at the nursing home (where she continues to receive hospice care), managed to spoon her own cake to her mouth and chatted, mostly coherently, for the first time in months.

When Bishop handed Eugene his diploma, he gave it immediately to his wife.

"I'd like to thank you all for what you've done," he said, his voice reduced to a whisper as he choked back tears. "My wife, she gets to see my graduation. I can't tell you what that means."

He spoke about his stunted schooling and his lifelong efforts to improve his communication skills, to better bring people around to the Lord.

Not one to let a preaching opportunity pass, Eugene quoted from Scripture and told those gathered to love their neighbors as themselves, to give their employers an honest day's work, to live each day as if it's their last.

"I have never quit learning," he said, tapping his cane on the floor for emphasis. "My wife taught me that. When you listen to your spouse — I figured this out long ago — you get better food on the table, too."

After the ceremony, he borrowed Sweeney's guitar and sang the ballad he'd written for their 50th anniversary in a strong, unwavering tenor.

It had been ages since Wanda felt well enough to sing with him, and moments earlier she hadn't recognized her own son.

Nonetheless, she recalled every word of "She's My Rose" and sang it perfectly, and some of the sniffles turned into very happy sobs.

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