

New graduate Bryan Corlett, the oldest graduate at University of Malta this year

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Bryan Corlett on graduation day with his wife and daughters.

It can be an ageist world, where fast-paced technology may alienate the elderly, but the 72-year-old man who graduated from the University of Malta last week did not feel out of place at any point in his two-year course.

"Maybe it just went over my head," joked Bryan Corlett, who completed a diploma in journalism.

As the oldest graduate this year, he had Generation Z classmates younger than his children and was senior to most of his lecturers.

But he is part of a trend. In March, he will be surpassed by an 80- and a 77-year-old, who will graduate with a Master of Arts in Mediterranean Studies.

Since 2020, 20 students over the age of 70 have graduated from the university, the oldest being a 92-year-old, who completed a Diploma in the Archival and Cultural Appreciation of Ecclesiastical Patrimony last year.

Corlett sailed through his course, emerging with the "added self-confidence" academic qualifications bring, 55 years after he had last studied.

Even though it was a "wonderful experience", the grandfather has no regrets that he did not do it earlier.

"Life is an evolution," Corlett said. "You start out as one person and change, hopefully for the better and trying to be more giving, as you build your character."

Back in New Zealand in 1971, he had passed his university entry exams but ended up travelling instead, making money in construction and mining and working on oil rigs.

Although he eventually returned to earn that piece of paper, he would still advise anyone young people going on a similar path to "go with the flow".

Corlett took a year off, knowing it might extend further. But he believes people should decide for

themselves whether to pursue their studies early in life or later.

His message is to "break your own concepts about who you are and what you are going to do. Do not let age block you. Break down the walls in your own mind and see it as an evolution".



Bryan Colette on his graduation at the University of Malta

A seasoned journalist

The University of the Third Age for late-life learning was not for him because Corlett was interested in a specific subject - journalism.

Living in Malta since 1982, he had already been writing for the Malta Rugby Football Union - he was also a former player, referee and captain in his other lives. But he wanted to see if he could be better at what he was doing and learn how to investigate more deeply.

Corlett is a Moonie, a member of the controversial Unification Church of the US, where he was backpacking in 1977. That is how he was "matched" to and married his Maltese wife.

The way the religious movement was "lambasted" in the media over the years motivated him to understand it and heightened his interest in how journalists work.

Technological barriers

Beyond the ethics, journalism is no longer just about writing skills and Corlett did grapple with the technological aspect of the subject at times.

"I did the stupid thing of buying myself a Mac, which I had never used before, at the start of the course," he said. "Luckily, I could occasionally reference one of my four daughters, who uses one."

He admitted that creating a website was a challenge he could not overcome. But he aced his PowerPoint presentation with a seven-page poem on the pros and cons of smartphones.

"A PowerPoint could be pretty boring, and I wanted to see how I could stand out in the class... I was the only one to get applauded at the end," he recalled.

"The lecturer gave me a score of 80 and said it would have been full marks - a rarity - had I just added two more points."

Bonding through the ages

Prof. Alex Grech, from the Faculty of Media and Knowledge Sciences, taught Corlett in his first year and

said he was one of his oldest students to date.

The septuagenarian brought to Grech's undergraduate class "curiosity, engagement, a willingness to question, a solid commitment and determination to get the degree done as another signpost of his rich life.



Bryan Colette on a school trip to the European Parliament



Bryan Colette on his first day at university.

"If I ever needed reassurance that a passion for learning and getting out of our comfort zone is what makes life worth living and my job worth doing, Bryan provided all that and more."

Corlett found this sort of encouragement all the way, starting from his four daughters and his wife.

Unlike his fellow students who were still in their 20s, he had to juggle his business, his family, rugby and his studies, though he benefitted from the flexibility of a part-time course.

As he steps out of the university, diploma in hand, Corlett is not necessarily seeking a new job.

"I am not too sure where to go with it," he said.

Corlett has just handed over his health food store of 34 years and may take up where an elderly author aunt in New Zealand left off with a rough story about the history of the Corlett family, which has been gathering dust.

"She blessed me with this mission on a trip back home in September... and I am somehow feeling that I should take it on," he said, armed with new writing skills and brimming with energy and confidence.