

Mom, three kids all graduate this month

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College marks a turning point for many families. Children start going their separate ways. Parents enter the strange silence of the empty nest.

Except, if you are the Keldermans.

This May, Mary Keldermans, along with three of her and her husband Steven's six children, all graduate from area colleges — two from Lincoln Land Community College, one from the University of Illinois at Springfield and one from Benedictine University.

Cramming for tests, waiting in line to use — for a time — the family's one computer, and sharing collegiate woes during dinner seem to have brought the family only closer.

Apparently, Mom was sort of a computer hog. Eventually she got her own laptop, as did one of her sons.

"She was absolutely dedicated to her studies," said daughter Claire, 23, who is graduating from Benedictine with a bachelor's degree in communications. "She'd write her notes in class, type them into the computer, print them and put them in a binder."

Mary, 53, who is graduating from UIS with a bachelor's degree in liberal studies with a social justice theme, began taking classes at LLCC in 2001. Eventually, she quit her job teaching adult religious education at the Cathedral of Immaculate Conception to become a full-time student. She hadn't taken notes in 30 years and had to sign up for some remedial math classes.

But she quickly acclimated.

"It was strange, because some of my kids' friends were classmates. I had been their room mother. But I was really comfortable walking into a room with kids in it. They would be very polite. They intentionally included me in things, like group projects. Though, sometimes I think they held back to let me talk."

Son Jonathan, 26, said he and his mother overlapped at LLCC for a while. He enjoyed seeing her in the hallway. Sometimes he didn't want to walk with her, but not because of embarrassment.

"I actually didn't like walking down the halls with her because she was more popular than me," Jonathan confessed.

Jonathan also said his mom had a hard time giving up being room mother.

"She'd bake treats for the kids, especially if they had a speech to make or something," he said.

If entering college later in life proved easier than expected, hunkering down to study at home was a challenge for Mary, who studied a lot and "spent more time than necessary writing papers," according to one of her children.

"I'd miss dinners out and family functions to stay home and do homework," she said. "Not being able to be in my garden. When they're all upstairs (four of her children live at home), laughing, and I'm looking at a blinking cursor on a blank screen.

"I had to give up going to a Cardinals game to study for a Western civilization exam. I got a 99 percent," Mary said.

Many of her stories about exams and papers end with an A. Jonathan said his mother earned a 4.0 GPA.

But she also cited the advantages of earning her degree later in life. In history classes and while studying contemporary issues — Vietnam, civil rights, etc., — she could rely on her own experiences, while such things were more abstract for many of her younger classroom peers.

When studying feminism, Mary recalled she essentially bypassed the Equal Rights Amendment battles of the 1970s.

"I was a really busy mom," she said. "But now I could see how strong women were, seeing the history I lived through."

Claire said her mother's academic success didn't create pressure for the others.

"I'm really, really proud of her," Claire said. "She got teased more than anything. She tried to make sure not to pressure us about grades. Though, if we occasionally skipped class, she'd ask where we were supposed to be."

When they all were able to sit down together — usually for their traditional Sunday dinner — college gave them more to talk about.

"The dinner conversation centered around school," Claire said. "Gripping about papers, tests, how 'this class is so hard.'"

Their shared college experience, as unique as it may be, masks the family's secret — a closeness forged by traditions, faith, youthfulness and getting along.

Mary confesses to liking video games (Jonathan gave her some Nintendo games for Christmas). All six children, the youngest of whom is 22, the oldest 32, still live in the Springfield area and attended Catholic schools together as children. Several family members work or have worked for Wells Fargo, where Steven is vice president of secondary mortgage markets.

For family graduation parties (including the upcoming graduation bonanza on May 23), Mary and Steven always rent one of those large inflatable bouncy rooms — for the adults. They're also renting popcorn and snow cone machines this year.

"I don't know how to nail it. But my parents have always made sure we've stayed real close," Claire said. "Family vacations, going downtown. We've just always gotten along. There's always going to be some fights and things. But I can't imagine not being this close."

Mary has one more final paper left — a seven- to 10-pager on minority women. Jonathan plans to enroll at Benedictine in an accelerated business program. The youngest, Phil, 22, still is considering his next move, after studying business and marketing at LLCC. Claire, who has a temporary job at the Illinois Department of Transportation, is considering graduate school.

Mary said she'd like to find a job, perhaps in the service sector.

"But it's the strangest thing," she said. "In the back of my mind, I've been thinking of going to graduate school."

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