



Season 2, Episode 18: Never too Late: Returning to College in Later Life.

Description: Listen in as Gerontology Professor Catheryn Koss talks with two non-traditionally aged students, Darryl E Lambert (alumni) and Faye Kayo (current student). They share their experiences of being undergraduate students at Sacramento State.

Musical intro lyrics: Company under construction, the function, justice for the human family we demand it. Justice, true freedom, equality is a must. Thus, decolonization of the planet. So bust this. People be the power now we're Building Justice. Pulling out divinations, now we're Building Justice. Welcome the planet to the Podcast, "Building Justice," "Building Justice," "Building Justice." Building is to add on, or to do away with.

Beginning of Conversation

Welcome to Building Justice, a podcast by Sacramento State University's Center on Race, Immigration and Social Justice (CRISJ). We explore critical issues affecting our communities with the hopes of creating a healthier and more just world. I'm your host for today, Catheryn Koss, Assistant Professor of Gerontology here at Sacramento State.

00:52

In her book a long, bright future gerontologist, Laura Carstensen, challenges the idea that life must be partitioned into the separate stages of education in the first two decades, work and family in the next decades, and then retirement. In the final years. She argues that by spreading education, work and time off across the lifespan. We could create a more age, integrated and flexible society that would benefit people of all ages. Even as university campuses strive to be more inclusive. Age, diversity, and the needs of older students are often overlooked. Yet nationally, about thirteen percent of college students are thirty years old or older. Here at Sacramento State, about one in ten of our students is at least thirty, and almost three hundred of our students are fifty or above.

01:42

Today, we are going to hear about the experiences of two Sacramento State students who return to college later in life. Darryl Lambert recently graduated with a degree in criminal justice. Faye Kaho is currently majoring in gerontology. Welcome to both of you. I'd like to begin by learning a bit about each of you. Faye. Please tell us a little bit about yourself and your background.

2:03

Hi, my name is Faye Kaho. I'm a Polynesian student from the island of Tonga, in the South Pacific. I graduated from high school in 1988 and began working for the broadcast commission in Tonga for fifteen years. In October 2000, I visited America on a vacation trip, met my husband, Richard. We got married in San Mateo in 2001, and relocated to Sacramento and have been here ever since. Um, right now, I'm working as caregiver.

2:40

We're so lucky to have you here in Sacramento. Darryl, how about you sharing some background with us about yourself?

My name is Darryl Lambert. I was born in Los Angeles, California. At ten years old, my mother, who was a single parent, she moved us from Los Angeles because they were just starting the gang problems and stuff in Los Angeles, and she was like, you know I need to move my family away. So we moved to Sacramento, and I grew up in South Sacramento, went to ah High school in the South Sacramento, and I always had the dream of going to college. But I end up going into the Navy. I retired from the Navy in 2017, and the Navy offered me the opportunity to go to college. So here I am in college. After I started in the Navy, I got married, married my beautiful wife. We are now married twenty years. I have three children, one who is a college graduate already. I have a twenty-year-old who's a junior at San Diego State, and I have an eleven year old, and the eleven year old keeps me busy with being involved with activities coaching sports. That's my passion, working with youth.

4:00

So glad you're with us, Darryl, about how long of a break did you take from school before you returned to complete your degree?

It's been actually thirty years. I graduated high School in 1987. Then I started back school in 2017.

And you said that you paused because of joining the Navy when you graduated from high school? Did you consider going to college, or did you know you wanted to go into the military?

You know my story is going to high school. I was always a very good student, but I actually I never really got enough information about college. I always thought that only rich people can go

to college, so I never had the opportunity. I was never led into going to college by any counsel or anything like that, and so I end up being the first college graduate of my seven siblings.

So what happened? I know you said you retired from the Navy. What else was going on in your life that made it possible for you to say I'm ready to go to college?

Wow, so as I was in the Navy, and then I came home from active duty and became a reservist. So while I was a reservist, I was able to - where you go to work and the military like one week in a month, and different times of the year you go to active duty, and then you come home, and I have a regular civilian job. And as I retired in 2017, I learned about the several benefits that come with being a retired military veteran. I'm also a disabled veteran, so I was able to go to what's called the vocational rehabilitation program where they retrain you in the field of your choice. So that's how I wound up being able to go back to school

6:05

That's fantastic. Faye, what about you? About how long of a break did you take from school?

Like Darryl, I graduated from high school in 1988, and apart from attending trade schools in Europe, New Zealand and Tonga, I formally returned to school, attending Community College in Sacramento in 2006. But my duties as a wife and mother kept pulling me out of college until I finally graduated with an associate of Arts degree in 2016. Other than family duties, financial hardships were also the main cause of delaying my education. I always put my children first. Personally, I believe, if I put my children in private Catholic school, it would be a proper foundation for them to be better men and better women once they are out in the world. Well, that's my personal preference. I think education can be taught later, but disciplining your child with good manners and enlighten them with spiritual upbringing will confirm how they will cope with future problems as it occurs. Now that both of my children are in college right now, I have decided to return to college so I can finish what I have started and also to make me a better assistant for the older adult generation, as I am working as a caregiver.

07:36

What was it, specifically, that happened that you said, yes, now is the time for me to go back to school?

Yeah, actually from the beginning, at home I have my husband. We are twenty-two years apart in age, and he was forced to resign from his job in 2020. So for me it's time for me to step up, take over the ford, you know, becoming the main income earner. But the thing is, I cannot earn enough income for where I am right now to actually help my family out. So I was looking at, the only thing for me is go back to school, maybe earn a degree, and then maybe step up from being a caregiver to another level, where I can be able to support my family in the long run.

I'd like to stay with you for a little bit here. Think back to the first day of class here at Sac State. What was it like for you to come to campus and walk into a classroom?

Oh, boy. I freaked out. The first day of class. Without entering, I came and peeked through the class window at the door, and I saw about twenty-five or thirty students were in class at the time. I wasn't late. It was about like two minutes before the beginning of class. Oh, my goodness! And I saw all the students were the same age as my daughter. I thought to myself, probably this is not the type of school for me to enter. They will look at me like, hey, grandma, what are you doing here? You're supposed to be at home. I had all those kind of negative mindset that I shouldn't be in that classroom. But the lucky thing is, I had my daughter with me, who was supposed to drop me off and use the car that evening. She said, "Mom, you have to go in. You have to enter that door. I'm not taking you home. You have to get in there." I said, "No, I think I'll come back tomorrow. I'll delay just today, and I'll come back tomorrow. Maybe tomorrow is a better day. Maybe there will be another elderly person there that actually sit with me in class." My daughter just kept on, you have to go in there Mom. you have to get in right now. You have to go in. So I walk around, walking around, summoning up my courage, and I saw one guy came out. I think he's probably in his forties, or about my age. I saw him walking in the classroom, and that's a sign that it says to me, go in. You have another person there, the same age as you, you can go in.

So I actually entered, and I apologized to the Professor. But there is one thing, Professor Koss, that we talked about before, and you told me if you are thinking of dropping a class, do not do so without talking to the professor in that class. And I did it actually. That voice came back in my mind, I'm supposed to talk to her. Maybe I'll try. So, at the end of class I talked to the professor. She was very nice and kind. And she said, "Faye, when is a good time for you to return to the school? You tell me. Education is for all ages. As long as you are able, hey, come on in, join us. This is for everybody. It's not age restriction. You have to become a student, if you are still able to do so. And so here I am.

11:55

I am so proud of you. Darryl, what was it like for you to come to campus and walk into a classroom after being out of school for a while?

Wow! That's a great question. Dr. Koss. So, I actually started at a Sacramento City College in 2017. So I was a transfer student to Sac State. But that first time I stepped into a class for me, it was like I am finally here because college was always a dream. And again, like I said, I wasn't, you know, given the proper resources to navigate getting into college. So, it was just, it was dream come true, and I was so excited, and I had a new backpack, and you know I had my pencils just like a little kid on the first day at school. It was awesome. And I get in the class, and I sit down, I'm looking around like wow, I'm the old guy here.

I notice the younger kids, younger students, not kids, they're not as talkative because they're getting to know each other. They're kind of feeling things out. But for me, I was at home, and I found myself talking to everybody and then the other kids, you know, the students began to talk to me more, and then I end up being like the go-to person, and I'm like. What, am I talking too much? And then it was great to hear my professor say, "You know, Darryl, it's really a pleasure having you in class, because whenever there is a dull moment, you always ask a question that a lot of the students wouldn't ask that they probably wanted to ask." And you know, it just it was just, it was just great. I just really felt like I was at home in the classroom.

14:01

Well, Darryl, you're leading me to my next question, which is, what are some of the advantages that you think you had as an older student?

Wow! I would say, you know, probably the main thing is just life experiences. You know a lot of the life experiences that I had as a person 50 plus, well at the time I wasn't fifty. But as an older student I was able to relate and have real life stories that usually went with the curriculum that we learned at school. It was just being able to be a voice, able to share stories of my childhood, or as a high school student, and as a twenty-year old that some of these same students were just going through real time. So I was able to share some of that. But at the same time, they were able to tell me how to navigate the Internet, how to go on these different websites to find information that I really hadn't had any knowledge at the time. Really great experience.

Great. Well, that leads me to my follow up question, which is what were some challenges that you faced coming back to school?

Some of the challenges, you know, so kind of peer groups, you know. In college there, you know, didn't really have particular peer groups. So, it was kind of, you know, kind of being able to make the twenty-year old students feel comfortable talking to me, you know, at times because they were like, you know, kind of letting them know that, you know, hey, I have experience that I can share with you. You can share with me. So that was kind of breaking that barrier, but once that barrier was broken, you know I was able to build a lot of great relationships. Other challenges, I would probably say just, you know, I had a little computer experience, but I didn't work in that field as a civilian, you know, working in the regular workforce, but getting the school and learning Microsoft Word. And my first paper was due. And here I am up all night writing a paper, and I hit one button, and my paper was gone! And I'm pulling out my hair. I'm like, oh, My God! My wife was like, what's that? I was like, just forget it. I'll figure it out. It's just having to figure out different things working on Excel, and Microsoft and building PowerPoints. I really hadn't had any of that experience, so just kind of getting through that. But you know it was a great learning curve for me.

16:38

Faye, does any of that sound familiar? What kinds of advantages and challenges do you think you had coming in?

Yeah, like Darryl, I think the advantages that I have as a mature student, now my mind is like settled down a bit. I can take things in a deeper meaning, like when I go to school. If I there is an issue or a topic, you know, it's right there for you to analyze and evaluate. I have the mindset to actually see more deeply, rather than a younger student, that you only see the surface. And I, I have, like Darrell said, we have more experience to actually dissect and evaluate the situation, and then put it into practice in a classroom, and I think that's a plus for us adult learners as we enter, because we come in as a mom. We come in as a father. And we have all these packages to pull into practice in a learning process as we enter school, and I think there's a plus for us. For the challenges for me in particular. I think time. All these things in my family going on right now. My husband is not working. I think time is my worst enemy right now. And I always put myself on what's going to happen in the future. If I delay my degree another two or three years. What about my family? I have to drop and come back to take care of them. I need more time for work in order to cover the needs at home. So, all those things, they are the challenges that I have right now. The other thing is apart from having all the young pupils in school. They have a very competitive mind. They have more digitized knowledge of using a computer like Darrell said, but the only plus for me is I have my children. I picked the right time for me to go back to school because they're already used to using the computer at home. So every time I need a computerized things with my paper, or, like Darrell said, that PowerPoint presentation and everything, I ask them and they said Mommy do this, do that, and then they stood there and let me handle it myself to see if I master it. If not, they were like, Oh my gosh, Mom, you should do it like this! How many times have I told you? They're the teacher now, and I'm so glad that they are in the age range that they can actually assist me. Now, it's a two-way thing as you look at you as a parent and your children. Your work is done. Now they're helping you.

19:34

Darryl. You're shaking your head. Have you had a similar experience?

You know, it's amazing. I believe I shared earlier that I had an older son. He graduated college, and we were kind of going to school at the same time, but it was just awesome to just, he's working, and you know, he would come home from school at times, and then he'd see me and I'm working. And it was just amazing for him to be able to see me as a student, and him being a student, and I'm watching him. So we kind of motivated each other. And then, as he graduated, and then my younger son started school, my middle son, he's a junior at San Diego State. He would come home, and he'd tell these stories about what he's struggling at in college to his mom,

and mom wouldn't understand. He'd go, "Dad, you know how we would go through finals and this kind of thing?"

I'd say, yeah, I know what you're talking about. Mom doesn't know, she's not a student. It was great, and I think me going to school, I motivated them. At the same time, they motivated me. So, you know, it was awesome that we were kind of going to college at the same time, and then I have a younger son. He's eleven now, and he's already talking about what college he's going to go to, and what college he wants to go to, because he's able to see Dad doing it, and his brother is going through the process. It's been an amazing journey.

Let's take a short break. We'll be right back with more discussion about what it's like to be a non-traditionally aged student.

21:24

Welcome back I'm Catheryn Koss, Assistant Professor of Gerontology here at Sacramento State. We're talking with Faye Kaho, a current Sacramento State student majoring in Gerontology, and Darryl Lambert, who recently graduated from Sac State with a degree in criminal justice. Before the break, we were exploring the advantages and challenges of returning to college later in life. I'd like to hear more about what it's like socially to attend Sacramento State as an older student, Darryl, you mentioned this a little bit earlier. What was it like for you? How did you connect with students?

I'm kind of a people person, so that kind of helped me. Part of it was being in the classroom setting. We'd be in group settings. We'd have different group projects to work on. We'd be in a group setting, or we have to meet up, and you know, if there'd be five of us in the group, and we'd be all looking at each other, and no one kind of would say anything, because it's kind of you know, being not really familiar. And then I, for some reason, I would always be the one that kind of broke out. Okay, Hi, I'm Darryl, you know. Hey, what do you guys want to do? I can be the facilitator this time, and you know maybe you can be or someone else can be the facilitator next time. So, it was just, it was a great experience kind of learning how to get, you know, make my way into the peer circles, kind of, you know, involve myself on campus. I was always curious. I just walk around, and you know you'd have the different clubs presentations right on the yard, and I just stopped and say, Hey, what's going on? Because I wanted that college experience. So, I kind of just did it all, you know. I finally am here. I finally got my college chance. So, it was my time. It was great.

That's great. Did you join any clubs or associations on campus?

I joined the Associated Students. I joined that group kind of towards the end. And because, unfortunately for me, I guess because once I got to Sac State, that was the spring semester of

2020. So, I was literally on campus for three months, and then went online, and so then I finally was able to come back in my last semester full time, So I was kind of making up ground, you know, and I'd go in every building because I kind of missed out on being on campus. So, unlike some students who enjoyed being online, I was begging to get back to campus.

24:03

Faye, how about you? How have you connected with other students, and I know it's been challenging because of Covid. But what's been your experience? Unlike Darryl, I'm an introvert. Right now, it's okay. But I'm hoping to be better at connecting with other students. I think it's still too early to tell that. But I'm trying my best, like having the group discussion, having to pair up with somebody, I think it went good for the past two semesters. But I'm hoping to be better socially.

Have you considered joining any clubs on campus?

I have applied for clubs, but so far, I haven't been contacted by anybody. But I'm hoping, you know, there, there's one thing I was looking for. I thought that that there might be a club for older adult learners, but I didn't see any. I was tired of looking around for a club for mature people on campus, so

I end up with like Catholic club. There is a Newman club, and there is another one for the Pacific Islanders, but I'm hoping to actually partake in those clubs in the near future.

Faye, you've already spoken a little bit about this, but what role has your family played in your educational journey?

At first my husband didn't like the idea. He's old school, and he thinks that education is not for me. It's for our children, and it's my job to nurture them at home, and be a mother and push them forward. But I come from a family where God and education is the most important part as we grow up, so I will never lose that part, no matter how he would like to stop me. He will never do that. I have to rebel a little, because I know that I still have a brain. I still have to work it. To me, my children are my backbone. They push me forward. Mom, you're lucky. You have a degree with that little Associate's. You can go further. It's not too late for me to be a role model for them. There's still time for me to walk that stage. Show them that I, your mom, can still go to school and can earn a degree, and if she can do it, you can do it too. So, I'm actually trying to be on that pathway for them.

Darryl, what about your family? What have they played in your educational journey?

They have been, my family has been very supportive, very for sure, when I was working in the, you know, in the public sector, and you know, military. I completed my military assignment, and

we had what's called a post deployment retirement seminar, and that's where I first learned of the benefits available for me to go to college. And my wife was saying, you know you should. - kind of rewind a little bit. I work for Target Corporation. At the same time, I was in the military, like I said, in the reserves. You know I worked for them for years. And we went to this retirement seminar. My wife was like, you know what? You always wanted to go to college. You should really take advantage. I'm like, okay, babe. But you know, if I go to college, you'll be the only breadwinner in the house, for now. She said, you know what? You worked two jobs this whole time. I think it's time for you to do it. So, she kind of gave me the push to it. My son, he again, my twenty-five-year-old now, but at the time he was probably starting his sophomore year in college, and he was like Dad, you know where you going to go to college? And you know, he was excited. They all really supported me, you know, when I was doing my studies. You know my other son was - one of my sons again. He had moved out, and then he came home from college, and he said, Okay, Dad, I'll take Kingston, which is my youngest, and I'll take him to baseball practice because I know you got a product to work on. It worked out really well, and it gave me a sense of I don't have to worry about this, because I didn't work while I was going to college, so that that really worked out. So, it really gave me the time to really focus on school.

28:51

Yeah, that's a real gift, to be able to go to college without working. I know Faye, you mentioned that that's a real challenge for you. You're balancing not only family, but also work and school. I'd like to ask each of you for some advice. First of all, Darryl, what advice would you give professors who want to make courses more inclusive for adult learners of all ages? What could we do as professors?

Ah, professors, I would, I would probably first of all kind of going back what we were just talking about. Be kind of more understanding when it comes to older students, because we do have a work-life balance that we have to navigate through. And you know, I had some experience where most of the professors were, you know, they were understanding. But I did have other professors that weren't so understanding, you know. Not really giving favoritism, but just kind of giving some more understanding when it comes to older students, because we have a lot of other things that we are balancing. There's times when, you know, things conflicted, and I had to take my son to a doctor's appointment. The professor, you know, one professor would be like, okay, yeah, no problem. Just let me know. You can reschedule this quiz. And I had other professors at times they would be like, well, this is the only day you're going to get the quiz, because once it goes out, you know that's it.

Faye, what about you? Do You have some advice for professors,

I think, first of all, the points made by Darryl. That's very important for us all. But just in addition to that, I like the way that Gerontology class is actually conducted. How they are

actually teaching right now, like they have not only the audio and visual arts as part of the presentation, but we go out to the field. Like today, we're going, as gerontology majors, we're going to a nursing home. And we also team up with older adults from Renaissance to guide us along on our studies, and I think that's a very excellent way of teaching, because it's not only hands on learning, but at the same time it helped us older learners to actually put everything in practice. What we brought forward. Instead of being a bookworm from the beginning of semester to the end to graduating. It gives us, you know, more time to touch base on what we already learned in life and put it into practice, and I think that's a good way. Finally, I think it's just like Darrell was saying. Just go easy on us. We are not young enough. We are actually not very competitive in the field of learning. Take it easy on us older learners, because we might not have the fully complete mindset to be on the competitive road to learning. But we'll be there at the end. We'll strive our best to, you know, to beat the young pupils to the end of the line. And we promise it's forward ever, backward never for us.

32:13

I'm going to ask each of you also some advice from the University's perspective. Darryl, beyond the classroom, what do you think the University could do to be more inclusive, you know, in terms of age, inclusivity?

I think Faye brought up a good idea as far as having like maybe an older students' kind of club or a classroom where we can meet at, and you know, talk, or we can kind of mingle, commingle and share ideas. Maybe they could've had a certain area that we can go to and ask specific questions, so maybe like, uh, maybe like a specific counselor or a professor that we can go to and share specific concerns that we had. So maybe a little more resources in that area. I think that would be helpful.

Thanks, Darryl. Faye, I see you nodding your head. Do you echo those suggestions? Do you have any other suggestions.

Darryl always says everything first! You go Darryl, you can speak for both of us. For me, I wish there were more incentives to motivate older learners, maybe scholarships. Older learners have past experiences. Why not cross-credit their past experiences? I was hoping to see an accelerated program for older learners like they have in the community college. But I know there are restrictions. But I'm just hoping to see some of those incentives for older learners. And, like Darrell, was saying, why not have a timeframe during the day, or the week, or the month for an older-learners only classroom for them to attend, and, I think it would help a little to move us forward and not to feel embarrassed like myself and go back home. And another thing, Darryl, I want to see your wife on campus. If we can do it.

Oh, my gosh! That's a great idea! That is a great idea.

34:30

Well, I'd like to ask each of you, what does it mean for you to get to earn your degree? Darryl, I'll start with you. What does it mean now that you have your degree?

Man, it means so much. I mean it's just such an accomplishment. You know, I was doing it for me personally, as a goal that I had many years ago. Again, like I shared, to go to the school, and I always had this dream. You know, because I knew I could be successful in college, and I just, you know, and I, but I always have that in my mind. You know I never had a counselor, whoever to push me, and tell me that, you know, you can do it. So it was a great accomplish for me, but it also was, again, to show my children that you guys can go to college and be successful because I was, of my seven siblings in my family, I was the only one to get a four-year degree. And so, I was doing it for them to show them that it's not too late, and I was doing it for other older people, you know. I still have friends and family, and they're like man, you did it! Just this weekend, I had a friend of mine, and he was like, you know what? I think I'm gonna go back to college now. So, I did it for myself, but I did it for others to show them that it never too late, and it's always possible. You just got to take that first step and do it.

That's fantastic, Darryl. Faye, how about you? What does it mean for you to get, once you earn your degree, what do you think it'll mean for you?

It means everything, Professor. Just in addition to what Darryl was saying, It's still time for us to be role models for our children. And there's one thing that I want to prove my extended family wrong when they say that caregiving is not a career. I want to prove to them that caregiving is a career that can earn you a degree, and then you can level out with them with whatever associates' or masters' they have in whatever field they are. We are in the same ring. I'm not outside. We are inside together. And I want to show those young people that if I can do it, and Darryl can do it, why not they? We still have the capability. We have the potential to continue on, and to show the older learners who are not yet in campus, and having to prove that they can earn a degree, it's still time for them to come forward and earn a degree for themselves if they want to change careers. I'm pretty sure. There's still time for all of us to do that. Sky's the limit. If you are able to do that, you know, well, why not?

37:14

I'd like to end by asking each of you to share a piece of advice for others who are returning to school later in life. I'll start with you, Faye.,

I know for me personally you have to summon up the courage. It's not an easy task, because you have to juggle a lot of things at the same time. But don't give up. It might look very daunting in the beginning. But now this is my third semester in college. I think that the only thing for you is

to have the courage put to feet wet and continue on to the end. Because, if you still have the mindset, you are going to win this. You're going to graduate with a degree, and you never know you might continue, and I can see it in Darryl. He will continue on with the master's. And yeah, it's never too late.

If you're fifty, I'm over fifty, and I'm still attending class, and I'm with the young pupils there. But I know I can do it, and if I can do it, other older learners can do it.

Thanks, Faye. How about you, Darryl? What piece of advice would you like to share?

My piece of advice is, I forget where I heard it, what someone told me. If you aim at nothing, you're bound to hit it. So set a goal and go after it. You hear so many people saying, "Oh, I wish I would have went to college. I wanted to go." Take the leap and go do it. And you may find that, being an older student, you are able to focus on exactly what you want to do as opposed to being a younger student when your mind is kind of like, I don't know what I want to do, when you kind of get into those first years, and you take those lower courses. But as an older student, you already have your mind focused on what you want to do, and just go out and do it. Take the lead, and you'll find yourself, you'll probably be a better student as an older student than you were as a young, so it's never too late. Go out and do it. A degree doesn't have your age on it. The degree just says that you completed it. So. it's never too late.

Well, thank you so much to both of you for taking the time to share your experiences and insights. We are so very fortunate to have both of you as part of our Sacramento State community. Thank you for listening. We hope our ongoing conversations spark understandings, empathy and motivation to join the struggle for a better future for all.

Music outro lyrics: No more penalties and no more wars. Based on the actions. Now, time for "Building Justice," "Building Justice." Time for building justice, justice.