

By Maggie Blackwell

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More than 700 graduates were recognized at Rowan-Cabarrus Community College's 46th commencement exercises Saturday at the Concord Arena and Events Center.

Graduates ranged in age from 16 to 73, with the average age being 31.

The "Three Musketeers," as they call themselves, are all somewhere close to 60, and they graduated together, all with honors. Soon after enrolling, the three women found each other and stuck together through their studies. They encouraged, kidded, and basically pulled each other through to graduation. All three graduated Phi Theta Kappa, the two-year-college version of Phi Beta Kappa.

"I wasn't supposed to be here today," Ann King-Padilla said. "But I am."

A breast cancer survivor, she aspires to develop a breast cancer detection device. She graduated from RCCC with an associate arts degree and hopes to transfer to North Carolina State to further her studies.

Margarita Gross, 64, received her associate's degree in early childhood education. "I put my family first," she said, "and got my GED on my 60th birthday. Now I got my associate's degree."

She plans to work wherever children need her.

Janie Aldrich, 59, received her associate's degree in early childhood education.

Aldrich, who lives in East Spencer, has always been a hard worker. She wakes at 4 a.m. most days and likes to arrive early everywhere she goes.

She started work at Frito-Lay in 1972 as a packer, putting finished product into boxes. After 10 years, she moved to processing raw materials, working in that department for another 10 years. She is proud that her plant won first place awards for quality and production, beating 47 other plants, for 19 of her 20 years of employ.

While working at Frito-Lay, she took a couple of semesters of classes at Shaw University, driving to Kannapolis after completing a 12-hour shift. She wanted a degree in criminal justice. But despite making four A's and a B in her five classes, the hours and the drive took a toll on her.

"Some days I was so tired I felt like I could eat razor blades and chew bullets," she said.

During Aldrich's 20th year with the company, Frito-Lay bought some holdings from Anheuser-Busch. Plants were combined, and some were closed, including the plant on Long Street. In 1999, Aldrich found herself without a job.

"It's like unto a death when you lose your job," she says. "You're so used to seeing your co-workers. I knew some of them from graduation through grandbabies."

Finding a job at GDX, Aldrich worked making rubber gaskets for car windows. It was during this time that Aldrich discovered she had high blood pressure and diabetes. After six years, she was laid off again when the company shifted work overseas in 2006.

Aldrich had no work and needed expensive medications. "God bless Good Shepherd Clinic," she says. By the time she found the clinic, her blood sugar was so high it was affecting her vision. Her cholesterol also was elevated. She says the doctors, nurses and pharmacists who help at the clinic are angels on earth.

"I was in a bind. Without them, school would not have been an option. They were a blessing to me," she said.

Aldrich took advantage of a program through the Employment Securities Commission to return to school. This time, she chose to study early childhood education.

Along the way, Aldrich raised her only child, Anthony, with high expectations. "She worked hard as a single mom," he said, "and expected me to work hard, too. My job was making A's in school. I did, too."

He served as class president at East Rowan High School and graduated with honors. He worked hard to put himself through school at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and now works as a senior project manager in investments at Bank of America.

Aldrich says his mom put her life on hold to raise him. He is almost as proud of his mom as she is of him.

Sandra Novick, director of the program at RCCC, is trying to persuade Janie Aldrich to apply to Catawba and pursue her bachelor's degree. Aldrich is concerned about financing such a move, saying, "We'll have to wait and see on that one."

After thinking for a minute, she added, "I should have started working with kids when I was 20."

On Monday, Aldrich will return to work at Rowan-Cabarrus Early Childhood Center, where she tends to preschoolers. Until now, she has been a classroom assistant, but she has been offered the position of lead teacher. Unfortunately, due to state salary freezes, her salary will remain the same, even if she accepts the higher responsibility. She's not quite sure what she will do.

"God didn't bring me this far just to let me down," she said. "He helps those who help themselves. I got to keep going."

Fletcher L. Hartsell Jr, the North Carolina state senator representing Cabarrus County and a portion of Iredell, gave Saturday's commencement address. He challenged graduates: "Never, never, never, never, never stop learning. Go forth with a quest for learning."

Trustee Ray E. Paradowski presented a distinguished service award to J. Newton Cohen in honor of his years of service to the community college and to the community at large.

Dr. Carol Spalding, the new president at RCCC, gave closing remarks.

Graduation marshals were Maria Riveria Bonilla, Danny Center, Sandra Clark, Tiffany Cogan, Courtney Goudes, Melissa Green, Cindy Lee, Darlene McCorkle, Michelle McCrary, Jose Napoles, Rose Pavia, Kimberly Reavis, Mary Rouille, Timothy Q. Shay, Terri Smith, Victoria Witherspoon and Virginia Yost.