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Cancer inspires RCCC student to graduate

By Jessica Groover | Independent Tribune
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CONCORD — Never stop learning, Sen. Fletcher Hartsell said to the Rowan-Cabarrus Community College class of 2009 on Saturday at the Cabarrus Arena and Events Center.

More than 770 people, between the ages of 16 and 73, graduated, according to RCCC President Carol Spalding. And while Spalding told the audience that almost 300 of those graduating had already completed a program with the community college, for others, it was new to them.

As Patricia Ann King-Padilla walked across the stage on Saturday, it was her first time receiving a college degree. At the age of 59, she had already been living Hartsell's advice to never stop learning.

Five years ago, King-Padilla was diagnosed with breast cancer. During her treatment, she had both of her breasts removed, along with about 19 lymph nodes, and received six rounds of chemotherapy and 20 rounds of radiation.

After her sixth treatment of chemotherapy in April 2005, King-Padilla was placed in the intensive care unit for 11 days.
"I was just worried about surviving cancer, and I had this dream," King-Padilla said.

In her dream, she saw a new breast cancer detection machine with cones and plates that are placed on someone and hooked up to an MRI machine. The purpose was to have better detection for breast cancer.

"When I had the dream, I felt like I got off a death bed and had to do this," King-Padilla said. "When I got well enough to come to school, I came back to invent it. That's been my purpose since then, and I figure, that's the reason God let me live."

King-Padilla had not been in a classroom for about 40 years. In the 1960s, she attended college for a few weeks but left to focus on her family.

She was a seamstress and a housewife for many years, and the idea of going back to school in her 50s was terrifying for her.

"I didn't know how I was going to pay for it," King-Padilla said. "I was looking at all these young kids (who attended)."
Fortunately for King-Padilla, she received financial aid and turned to her mother, who had gone back to school and graduated from college in her 60s, for advice about being one of the oldest in her classes.

"I called my mom, and she said to go and act like I was the same age as the others and focus on my studies," King-Padilla said. "She was right. The kids and the school opened their arms to me."

She enrolled in January 2006, nine months after her dream and just after her treatments were complete. In her three years at the community college, King-Padilla has taken courses in computer programming, computer drafting and other classes.

She admits that the hardest part of going back to school was the math, and she credits her professor, Justin Bost, and other teachers for her many of her achievements.

Throughout King-Padilla's courses, her dream of the detection machine kept her motivated to strive for the best.

"(I thought), if I don't get this right, something might go wrong with the machine," King-Padilla said. "I have to get this right."

On Saturday, she graduated with honors and as a member of an honor society, Phi Theta Kappa, and a leadership society, Sigma Alpha Phi. She also had served two years as a senator for the Student Government Association.

Even though King-Padilla said she will miss the fellowship at RCCC, she looks at graduation as a major accomplishment and will continue to keep learning.

After receiving an associate degree, she now plans to attend a four-year college with nanoite technology and bioengineering so that she will be able to make her machine.

She will name the machine, "Laurie," after a friend who was working toward the same goal and died two years ago. "We made a promise to each other that whoever survived had to finish this," King-Padilla said.

King-Padilla is working with others to further the progress and one day make her machine used internationally. For now, she is looking at graduation as a huge step toward her dream.

"The most meaningful part (of graduation) is that I'm alive to do it, because it's not something I thought I'd be able to do," King-Padilla said. "All the odds were against me, and to be able to walk across that stage is the biggest accomplishment."