



'They are all my daughters,' says Elin Danien (left), flanked by two current Bread scholars, Helen Hansen and Molly Cronlund.

FEEL LIKE A SCHOOL GIRL AGAIN

Meet an Amazing Woman Who Found Going Back to College at 46 So Satisfying That She Started a Scholarship Program to Empower Other Midlife Women

By Elizabeth Kaminsky

Photos by Amber Fairweather

Last weekend, I spent an entire day with my dear friend Mary*. It feels like ages since I've seen her. We were able to spend time together, because she was on spring break from college. At 49, she's been work-

ing on her bachelor's for more than 10 years now, chipping away at her degree, one or two classes at a time. This semester, she is carrying six credits, while working a demanding job in the hospitality industry.

She isn't alone in her quest. According to Census data, 2.7 million women over 35 are enrolled in school. Each one has her

own reasons for being there. For some women who delayed entering college, it was a confidence issue. It took a little life experience to make them feel able to crack the books. Perhaps it meant waiting until the kids were grown. Or maybe divorce altered their life path and thrust them in a different direction.

For many women, going part time while working was the only way they could afford college. That's how it was for me. I went for my master's as a "non-trad"—affectionate slang for adults who return to school in ways that are nontraditional. I worked 60 hours a week, spent the other 100 as a caregiver, drove hundreds of miles, and lived on coffee and junk food. For those seven years, my face was locked in a sleep-deprived, sugar-doughnut stupor.

If I were going to school today, I'd still be in fashion. The National Center for Education Statistics (2000) states that 56 percent of all undergraduates were "highly to moderately nontraditional," meaning they worked full time, had dependents (i.e., care-giving responsibilities), and were not eligible for financial aid.

It's no surprise that the number of women going back to school has increased over the last few decades. As we Baby Boomers age, we can see the handwriting on the wall. More than half of future jobs will require education beyond high school, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, and jobs that require a bachelor's degree are expected to grow the most quickly. The Consortium for Higher Education states that employees will explore an average of four different careers during their lifetime. Making those career changes requires further education.

Women like my friend Mary know that first-hand. Getting her degree means a chance to better herself and to add to her marketability in the workplace. Undeniably, adding schoolwork to an already long to-do list is a tough task. It takes a purposeful, committed woman to head down the long halls of academia. It also takes money. Elin Danien is one such purposeful, committed woman, who determined to help others find the financial help they need.

CASTING HER BREAD UPON THE WATERS

Elin Danien started her seven-year journey toward her bachelor's degree at the University of Pennsylvania's College of General Studies (CGS) at age 46. (Call this remarkable woman *Doctor Danien* now; she received her doctorate at age 68.) Today, at 75, she is exuberant when she talks about her first experience as a college student. "I remember going to see my professor to find out my grade. I was so nervous. When he told me I'd gotten an A, I blurted out 'A gezundt oif dein pippick!' I assured this puz-

Elin Danien's greatest joy in achieving her college degree was 'realizing I wasn't a fraud. I also realized that my years of experience were worthwhile, too—and that I wasn't giving myself credit for that.'

Her children 'think it's cool, especially when they see that I have to do my homework, just like they do,' says one Bread Upon the Waters scholar.



Bread scholar Molly Cronlund and son Derek.

zled man that the Yiddish 'Blessing on your belly button' was a good thing. He seemed pleased, but nothing could match my elation."

In 1986, Danien put her money where her happiness was. "I wanted to help women whose education, like mine, had fallen through the cracks for a lot of reasons, mostly life getting in the way," she recalls. "I wanted my degree, but I knew I could only work towards it part time." She approached her advisers and college administrators with an idea—create a scholarship fund specifically for women over 30 who want to attend college part time and need financial help. She committed to donating \$1,000 a year, but she admits to giving "a bit more than that each year since." For a name, Danien and her advisers came up with "Bread Upon the Waters," after the Biblical adage about casting your bread upon the waters, and it shall come back to you tenfold.

A volunteer advisory board organizes fund-raising efforts, and the University helps raise further funds, providing guidance and steering donors in their direction. In its 18-year history, the Bread scholarship has "risen" to an endowment of over a million dollars. It has graduated 42 scholars, more than half of them with honors. "To my knowledge, this scholarship is one of a kind, just like the women who receive it," Danien reports, with a mother's pride.

Does any scholar, in particular, stand out in her mind? "They are all my daughters," she quips. "How can you pick a favorite child?" But there is one, Linda Santoro, who, Danien says, touched her heart indelibly. "She was our first scholar, and she died of cancer just before she would have received her degree. CGS broke precedent and awarded her degree posthumously."

Danien speaks easily about each incredible scholar's achievements, but she is more humble about her own. I am fascinated when she tells me that her greatest joy in achieving her degree was "realizing I wasn't a fraud." She explains she worked successfully in business for years, and everyone assumed that she had a degree. "When I finally graduated, summa cum laude and Phi Beta Kappa, it washed away all those feelings of not being legitimate. I also realized that my years of experience were worthwhile, too—and that I wasn't giving myself credit for that."

WITH A LITTLE HELP FROM MY FRIENDS—AND LOTS OF CHOCOLATE!

Molly Cronlund, a current Bread scholar, had plenty of exciting life experiences to take with her to Penn. She did a tour in the Air Force, got married, had three children and even worked for the National Security Agency. We joke that if she tells me more than that about her past, she'll have to kill

BACK-TO-SCHOOL 'BREAD' BASKET

To find out more about how to apply for the **Bread Upon the Waters Scholarship**, visit www.sas.upenn.edu/CGS/resources/bread.php. The following organizations also award scholarships to women returning to school in midlife.

The **American Association of University Women's Educational Foundation** (www.aauw.org) distributes more than \$3.5 million in fellowships and awards, including part-time and full-time Career Development grants for women seeking to advance their careers or return to the workforce.

The **American Nuclear Society** (www.ans.org) awards one Delayed Education scholarship each year to a women over 30 "whose formal studies in nuclear science, nuclear engineering, or nuclear-related fields have been delayed or interrupted."

The **Business and Professional Women's Foundation** (www.bpwusa.org) created the Career Advancement Scholarship Program to award financial assistance to disadvantaged women who want to further their education or return to work full time. Scholarships are available to women over 25 with financial needs and clear career goals.

The **Ethel Louise Armstrong Foundation, Inc.** (www.ela.org) works to "Change the Face of Disability on the Planet" by advocating the total inclusion of people with disabilities in society. Scholarships are available for disabled women seeking graduate degrees.

Microsoft (www.microsoft.com/college/scholarships) offers scholarships to women interested in studying computer science. Scholarships are for one year and have some internship requirements.

Talbot's (www.talbots.com and click on "About Us") awards small scholarships for part-time students and larger amounts for full-time students who have earned their high-school diploma more than 10 years before applying and "are determined to finally get that college degree."

Wyndham Hotels & Resorts (www.wyndham.com), in partnership with United Airlines and Meetings Professionals International, offers the WLI Wyndham International-United Airlines full or part-time scholarship for meeting planners who want to pursue academic degrees in areas related to the meeting profession, such as marketing, finance, food service, hospitality, etc. —E.K.



Better late than never: Back-to-schooler Maureen White (right) with Temple University classmates.



me. Cronlund says that she got the Bread scholarship "through my friends, providence and serendipity." She clipped a newspaper article about the scholarship and tucked it away, since she was too young at the time to

apply. She went to Penn anyway, got accepted and took a few classes. "I surprised myself and did fairly well, but then I met this life-affecting professor," she recounts. "I couldn't turn into a sponge big enough to hold all he

was teaching me. His words were like water on parched soil. I am a psychology major as a result. His confidence in me gave me the push I needed to pursue the scholarship."

She credits the supportive community of Bread scholars for contributing greatly to her success. "The atmosphere is infectious. These women support each other and stand by each other." I wonder what her children, who are 11, 8 and 4, think of their mom, the scholar. "They've told me they think it's cool, especially when they see that I have to do my homework just like they do."



Left to right: Molly Cronlund, Ellen Danien and Helen Hansen.

Bread scholars have gone on to become scriptwriters and social workers, anthropologists and chemists. They are single mothers, immigrants, wives and breadwinners . . . driven, persistent and tireless in their passion for learning.

What's next for Cronlund? "I want to give my learning back, working with children as a psychologist and helping them emotionally," she emphasizes. Cronlund's "give-something-back" attitude is key with the Bread scholars, who have given back more than tenfold. They have gone on to become scriptwriters and social workers, anthropologists and chemists. They are single mothers, immigrants, wives and breadwinners. They are driven, persistent and tireless in their passion for learning. They share those traits with the millions of other hard-working women who have returned to school without

the benefit of this amazing scholarship.

A love of learning and sheer curiosity have kept my friend Mary going in pursuit of her degree for the last 10 years, in spite of the financial challenges. Her only financial help has been partial reimbursement from her employer. "There is that 'a-ha' factor that happens in a really good course," she muses. "It's the moment when you can say to yourself, 'That's why this is the way it is.' I love that feeling."

"Who managed?" wisecracks Danien, when I ask her how she managed to keep up the hard

work. "Thank God I had my husband to cheer me on. You need someone to jab you and show you how far you have come," she remarks. "There are three wonderful women, fellow Ph.D. students, who are part of what I lovingly call the 'Old Bag Brigade.' We got together once a month, talked about our research, ate chocolate and bitched. It was wonderful."

Rita*, 62, felt she was successful, because she had her family behind her. "My husband and children were strongly supportive. They all had their degrees. I was the last 'kid' in school," she recalls. Her degree helped give her the confidence and the cre-

dentials to go into the workforce. Her advice to women who hit the books after age 30 is "be determined, organized and flexible."

Danien agrees, "Be prepared to work hard, but don't over-schedule yourself." Mary offers, "Find a program that is geared toward working adults, with the services, facilities and schedules you need."

A DEGREE OF SELF-CONFIDENCE

What is the payoff for juggling life, family and the pursuit of education? The women I spoke with all agreed that getting an education has delivered great rewards in their pocketbooks and in their self-esteem. I fondly remember Lena*, a former writing student of mine, whose hard-won degree took her from file clerk to human-resources manager. She was 45 when she started school, and my class was the first one she took. I still have a copy of her first assignment, which was to be an essay on writing.

She wrote: "Dear Professor, I've never really done any writing, except the letters I write to my sister in Canada. I'm afraid to write for anybody else. I know that my sister is happy to hear from me, so she won't judge what I write as good or bad. I write to her once a week, because I miss her and because phone calls are expensive. So I guess I write a lot, but probably not in the way you mean. I never really thought that much about writing, until one night when Jimmy (he's my 6-year-old) asked me what I was doing, and I told him I was writing to his Aunt Kit. He said, 'You write a lot, Mommy. You must be a good writer. I want to be a good writer, too.' I looked at his little face and I knew I had to do something to live up to that kid's opinion of me. That's why I took this class."

If that wasn't enough to rip my heart out, Lena added a postscript. "This is the first class I've taken since I graduated from

'There are three wonderful women, fellow Ph.D. students, who are part of what I lovingly call the 'Old Bag Brigade.' We got together once a month, talked about our research, ate chocolate and bitched. It was wonderful,' recalls Elin Danien.

high school in 1968. I don't really know how to be a college student, but I'd sure like to try. Please easy on me."

During the semester, I watched Lena's look change from confusion to confidence, as she succeeded in her assignments. Her 19-year-old classmates looked up to her. I never gave away the secret that she was a college novice. These kids thought Lena could do anything. So did I. The important thing was, by the end of the course, so did Lena. Not only did she get an "A" in my class, she graduated with honors from the college, seven years later.

Thinking about all of these women has inspired me. For a few years now, there's been a little voice inside my head that says, "Get your doctorate." It competes with the other voices that say, "Take a vacation" and "Clean out your closet." I confess to Danien about the doctorate thing. "Wonderful!" she bubbles. "I am a perfect example that women can do anything!"

The voices in my head are chuckling now, and I feel a strong urge for some vending-machine coffee and sugar doughnuts. Stay tuned. □

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