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IMPACT

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MOVING forward

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Reclaiming her education

Vera Morton found support at Virginia Western
to forge new accomplishments after past injustice.



By KARENNA GLOVER

When Vera Morton walked across the Berglund Center stage and received her diploma at Virginia Western's spring 2022 commencement, her age wasn't the only thing remarkable about her. Morton, 67, earned her Associate of Arts degree in Liberal Arts from the College as recipient of a groundbreaking scholarship rooted in Virginia's segregationist past.

Morton was denied education from 1959 to 1964 while growing up in Prince Edward County, one of five Virginia localities that elected to close public schools rather than enforce the Supreme Court's *Brown vs. Board of Education* decision to

desegregate schools. When she was finally allowed to go to school, Morton entered as a third-grader, having bypassed kindergarten through second grade. The loss of those critical years learning the foundational skills of reading,

spelling, writing and mathematics haunted her for decades.

Morton went on to complete high school with only nine years of formal education. She got married two years later to Lyle Morton, a United Methodist pastor, and moved to



Texas. Eventually, she and her family moved back to Virginia, settling in Radford where she decided to pursue clerical studies.

Morton was reminded of the years of education she was denied as she struggled through her first community college classes. One of her English professors was intolerant of her struggles with writing. He said to Morton, "Where in the world did you learn how to write? I have never ever seen someone with a high school diploma so dumb," Morton recalled. She offered to tell him her story. Instead, she said, he told her he could care less about her story and followed with: "I want you out of my class."

Determined, Morton stayed in the class, and despite her best efforts, that professor gave her a failing grade on every paper she turned in. (She stayed in his class until she was forced to either drop or fail his class.)

She received her certificate, but lost interest in continuing her education.

Once again, she and her family moved, this time to Kentucky where she worked at a telephone company. But the gaps in her education caught up to her. She lost her first position as a 411 operator because she struggled with the requirements to master spelling and pronunciations. Yet, when she landed roles that worked with numbers, she excelled and spent more than 10 years at the company.

Turning bad into good

In 2016, the Mortons moved to Roanoke, and Vera decided to attend Virginia Western Community College to sharpen her reading and writing skills. This time, she had a specific goal: to support her dream of one day writing a book about the challenges she and others faced in getting an education.

"My mom used to say you can do it, you can do anything, and as long as you do your best, you don't have to worry about the rest," Morton recalled. "No matter what, I always try to do my best and take the bad things and turn them into something good."

Morton began taking classes at Virginia Western in 2017. The following spring, she received a scholarship from the Commonwealth of Virginia's Brown vs. Board of Education Scholarship Program. This fund was set up for students like Morton who were denied education when schools were closed between 1959-64 to avoid desegregation. Eighty-eight individuals have taken advantage of the scholarship to date, and Morton is one of two people currently receiving funds, according to Lilly Jones, Reference Center Director at the Division of Legislative Services, which manages the scholarship fund.

The \$2 million scholarship fund was established in 2004, and only about half of that funding has been awarded. Morton would like to see the remaining amount used for children and grandchildren of those who were denied education. But that would require the legislative committee to redefine the usability of the funds and pass a statute supporting that change, Jones said.

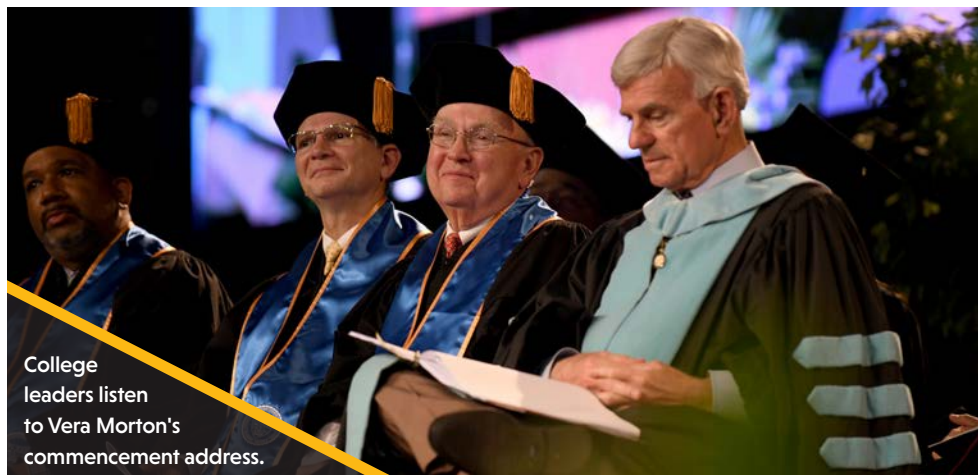
Bridging the gaps

To meet the foreign language requirement for her Liberal Arts degree at Virginia Western, Morton enrolled in Professor Thelma Simpson's Introductory Spanish class. English was tough enough for Morton, and learning another language was equally as challenging, prompting Morton to consider walking away from the degree. But Simpson wouldn't let her.

"She'd say, 'Not on my watch, you're not going to drop out. Come to my office every day after class, and I will work with you,'" Morton recalled. And that's exactly what happened.

"She's a great student and a real perfectionist," said Simpson, who retired from the College in 2019. "I helped her with whatever I could just by encouraging her, letting her know I was there, and my office was open to her."

By the end of the semester, Morton could read out loud. She received an A in the class – and a standing ovation for her final presentation, which was focused on her education struggles.



College leaders listen to Vera Morton's commencement address.

Sharing that story with the class not only gave Morton confidence and practice in public speaking, but it helped her classmates understand the real impact of inequality and educational disparity.

'I'm not done yet'

Morton credits the support of Simpson and others such as Amy Anguiano, Dean of the School of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences, for helping her get her degree. Anguiano listened to Morton's challenges with her English courses and offered her alternative classes that would still allow her to graduate, but Morton persisted.

"She just really wants to be a good writer," Anguiano said. "She really wanted to continue to put pen to paper all the time. She worked and worked in all the classes and never stopped."

While Anguiano acknowledges the support she offered Morton, she also cherishes the lessons Morton has taught her. "I would never have expected to have met someone with

the story and background that she has," Anguiano said. "I had such a different upbringing, but hearing her story, it's changed my perspective on everything."

Anguiano was in attendance when Morton spoke at Virginia Western's graduation, and she hopes to be invited to her next graduation as well. Getting her degree from Virginia Western was at the top of Morton's bucket list; still remaining on her list is visiting all 50 states and meeting Oprah Winfrey and former President Barack Obama as well as completing her book.

"I'm proud of what I've done but I'm determined, and I'm not done yet," Morton said with a laugh. "I still feel like I have a lot to give and encourage other people."

And this spring, Morton will be back at the College, pursuing a certificate in medical billing with intentions of beginning to write her book. ■

Watch Vera Morton's commencement speech online

