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Taylorville man enrolls in college sixty-five years after high school

Better late than never

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TAYLORVILLE — In his eighty-two years, Taylorville native Monte Siegrist has been an Eagle Scout, a soldier, an entrepreneur, a husband and father, a successful business owner for more than 50 years who oversaw the construction of more than 600 homes in Taylorville, a charter member of the Taylorville Optimist Club, President of the Springfield Area Builders Association, and a local philanthropist. It sounds like a pretty full resume, but one thing he is not, is a college graduate, at least not yet.

Five weeks ago, Siegrist decided to change that when he enrolled in classes at Lincoln Land Community College in Taylorville. His motivation for finally returning to the classroom is beyond multi-faceted. "I've always had a quest for knowledge. I was in business for over fifty years, so I thought I would go back so I can find out all the things I done wrong," he joked.

With a career that spanned more than a half century, Siegrist obviously got more right than wrong, but he did suggest that he was only half kidding. "I'm taking two classes right now, Entrepreneurship and Business Management. When I was in business, I attended over 100 seminars and 14 national conventions. I was always trying to get better at what I did, and I guess I'm still curious."

Of the two classes, Siegrist indicated that he is, surprisingly, having a harder time with Business Management despite his established track record in that very same area. "I had my first test last week, got an A in Entrepreneurship and a C in Business Management," he said. "That Business Management is tough because it's more about big business, but I can still relate to a lot of the things. They are more idealistic, but the principles are all the same."

"The one thing I learned is that there are two basic ways you start a business, one is by design and the other is by chance," he continued, while recalling his own start. "I think they're right because when I started out, it was by chance. I was thirty years old with six kids and I decided I couldn't make enough money as a carpenter to support my family. I remember the first house I built on my own, it's still over there in Kenton Addition. I went into the bank on a Tuesday and told them I wanted to borrow some money to build a house. I tore a page out of a house plan book and gave it to them, and they said OK. I didn't know anything about business, but I just went out and started building a house. I got it all done



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TAYLORVILLE — Monte Siegrist is shown here circa 1980 when he was already fully entrenched in his construction business. More than thirty-five years later, Siegrist finds himself entrenched in a new endeavor, the pursuit of a college degree.

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and had no idea what it was worth, so I asked around. I priced it at \$24,000, sold it for \$21,800, and I think I made \$800, which I thought was good."

While Siegrist admits that his primary motivation is his "quest for knowledge," as he puts it, he also suggested that the idea to return to class came to him as a result of a recent hospital stay. "I was in the hospital off and on for about six months. When I got out, they've got a program called SLS, senior living solutions I think. I took that course there, which is very good. I really liked it, but they made me graduate, they kicked me out of there," he said again laughing. "It was like going to school, and I enjoyed it so much that I thought I'd like going back to a regular school."

When asked how his educational experience is different now than it was in 1951 when he graduated high school, Monte humorously responded saying, "well, I've got grand kids as old as my teacher."

"I'll tell you how it's not different," he continued still laughing. "I didn't like to study then, and I don't like to study now. At least I have an excuse now. I can't even pick up the books, they're so heavy these days. If you ask me what's changed, it's the size of them books."

In a more serious manner, Monte noted that technology is the most notable change for him. "The biggest thing, of course, is computers. Everybody in the class but me has a computer," he said. "A lot of things are actually pretty similar. The teacher talks, and you listen. What's different with Lincoln Land is, the students are there because they want to be. When I was in high school, most of those kids, and me as well, were there because they had to be."

Monte did acknowledge how remarkable it is for him, now sixty-five years after graduating high school, to be back in the classroom, but he also elaborated on some of his other motivations. "My wife Lucy has really encouraged it. She is the woman behind the man," he said, while also indicating that he thinks his mother would appreciate his newfound interest in education. "My mom said I wouldn't amount to anything if I didn't get a college degree," he said with some obvious exaggeration. "I'm doing this for her, and she's been gone for twenty years."

Monte would probably never think of himself as inspirational, but his ambitious nature, especially at the age of 82, is certainly impressive. In fact, when presented with that very question, he laughed again and said, "maybe you're a little premature with your article, maybe you should wait and see if I actually finish the semester." Nevertheless, Monte's quest for knowledge will hopefully encourage others to pursue long-lost interests of their own.