

91-Year-Old Pursues Dream of College Degree



On the campus of Howard University, Isabelle R. Hammond, 91, stands out as the oldest undergraduate at the university—if not the oldest undergraduate in America. She strolls to class amid students who are young enough to be her great-grandchildren.

Photo by Harlee Little

by Henry Duvall

At age 91, Isabelle R. Hammond adds credence to the adage "you're never too old to learn."

The sprightly great-grandmother is trying to pick up the trail leading to a bachelor's degree at Howard University, where she had been an undergraduate in the 1920s.

"Surely, she is one of the oldest undergraduates in America, if not the oldest," says Richard Cortright, acting manager of the Institute of Lifetime Learning, a component of the American Association of Retired Persons.

Born February 14, 1896, in Washington, D.C., Hammond, who doesn't look a day older than 75, is a couple of weeks younger than another very active 91-year-old, comedian/actor George Burns. Asked what's her secret to longevity, she says in an interview, "It is to love work and your children...."

The composer, music teacher and founder of the Hammond Institute of Music and Fine Arts in the nation's capital began pursuing a degree in music at Howard in 1922. But when her husband died a few years later, the young widow discontinued her part-time studies so she could care for her six daughters and son, who then ranged in age from 3 to 13.

Six of them went on to college—all but one to Howard—with three graduating from the university.

"I think mama is dynamic," says her 67-year-old daughter Wilhelmina Hammond, with whom Isabelle Hammond resides in Washington. "She has sacrificed to raise seven children on her own."

Now decades later, with her children ranging in age from 62 to 72, the bespectacled grandmother of 12 has returned to the university, joining the ranks of students who are young enough to be her great-grandchildren, of whom she has six.

"I love to learn," she declares, indicating that she still would like to earn the degree she set her sights on years ago, if only for personal gratification.

"More and more older people are returning to college," says Cortright. According to a 1981 National Council on the Aging study, the number of older adults taking a course or enrolled in an education institution has increased to 5 percent from only 2 percent in 1974.

Last fall, Hammond earned academic credit for independent study in music therapy and for completing an individual research project that entailed gathering information on local home-studio music teachers and ministers of music. Says Dr. Relford Patterson, Howard's music department chair, about her research, "It was thorough and useful for our community outreach programs."

Then this current spring semester Hammond was able to take a seat for the first time in years alongside her young counterparts, seeking to find what she says is "the relationship of music to the human soul" in a course on the psychology of music.

Twice a week the briefcase-toting student gets a ride from her son-in-law or one of her daughters or else catches a cab to travel to and from the university. She sits front and center in the classroom as if she's "the hub of the class," says her professor, Ara Rachal.

One of her fellow students volunteered to help her tape-record the lectures, and the class doesn't seem to mind her being given take-home examinations. "The students are extremely helpful, although she doesn't need much help," Rachal emphasizes.

The class, composed of nine students, benefits from Hammond's years of knowledge and experience. Says the professor, "She adds a lot to the class."

Rachal explains that Hammond, for example, shared her insight in a class discussion regarding the meaning of music and how it is incorporated in life. Likewise, she learns from her fellow collegians. "She's very flexible in terms of accepting new ideas and in working with this generation."

Her young counterparts also get an added benefit. "They are learning that people do age, but they are still very capable of being involved in learning...." says the professor. "She has got so much energy. It overwhelms me."

Calling her classmates "delightful," Hammond notes, "I like to see them use their minds. That's invigorating for me. I've got to have my class over to lunch before school is out."

Besides the classroom study, she is also involved in another research project, giving her personal recollections of the early years at the historically black university, especially focusing on the school's music program.

Students at Howard in the 1920s seemed older than their counterparts today, she recalls, noting that many were studying to be preachers. "Very few were aspiring to become doctors and lawyers," she stresses in a clear, uncracked voice.

Hammond is among an estimated 767,000 Americans aged 90 to 94, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. Asked when did she retire, she snaps, "Retire? Not as long as there's life."

Music has been her life since age 5, when she began playing the piano. As a teen-ager, she began teaching children music, then later founded the Hammond Institute of Music and Fine Arts in 1921. She's still teaching today.

Every Saturday she is working with children 4 years old and up at a local church educational center, and she has been a volunteer aide for more than 40 years in the District of Columbia public school system.

When asked how the world has changed since she was a girl, Hammond points out that today's children have a greater opportunity to learn and advance than in her generation. But she believes many don't seem to be as goal-oriented. "In general, children don't seem to be reaching out like those of my generation."

She further notes that the parents had more influence on their children in her era. "Today's parents are lax in giving moral and spiritual guidance to their children," she laments.

When her daughter Wilhelmina Hammond was growing up, she remembers that her mother "taught us that we were just as good as anybody.... And she would say, 'Always hold your head up... always have bright thoughts...' I value her greatness!"

Isabelle Hammond maintains such a full schedule that she doesn't have time to dwell on her age. "I never think about my age," she smiles. "I'm not 91. I'm 16!"

Has she found the fountain of youth?

She starts her day reciting the "Lord's Prayer" every morning around 5:45—"before my feet touch the floor," she explains. Then she meditates, starting the day with what she calls "a certain brightness."

Her daughter notes that she eats "the right kinds of food." She leads off with oatmeal every morning "summer or winter," she says. Fruit, skim milk and only the white part of the egg are also part of her breakfast diet.

If prayer and a balanced diet are contributing factors to her longevity, then so is learning. "Life for me is education! Not only do you get knowledge for self, you get knowledge to share."

Words to live by?