

Great-grandma from Detroit, 87, graduating from college



[Charles E. Ramirez](#), The Detroit News 6:03 p.m. EDT June 3, 2016



(Photo: Robin Buckson / The Detroit News)

More than 1,800 students are expected to graduate from the **Wayne County Community College District** on Saturday, but it's likely none of them learned persistence better than Ruby Watson Parker.

At 87, Parker is the college's oldest graduate in its history, according to college officials.

"I've had to go over so many hurdles," Parker said. "That's been my life, going over hurdles. But I found my way, some kind of way. I didn't get nothing easy. I didn't want nothing easy 'cause I didn't want nobody saying they did something for me 'cause I can do it myself."

She said she's looking forward to graduating with her cap and gown, walking across a stage and accepting her associate degree in nursing at WCCCD's 47th annual commencement ceremony. The 11 a.m. event will be held at Ford Field in downtown Detroit.

Parker recalls her experience at the college fondly.

"I would always go back to (WCCCD) because I felt at home there," she said.

Parker was born in Alabama in 1929. Her parents moved around a lot as her father sought work and they came to Detroit when she was a second-grader.

She began taking classes at Wayne County Community College in fall 1969 with the intent of becoming a registered nurse. She was one of the first students in the school's nursing program.

"I wasn't old then," Parker said with a laugh. "I was young."

But the single mother of four had to put her studies "on the back burner" to raise her children. Later on, health issues slowed her efforts to finish up, she said.

Parker eventually went on to train as a nurse with another school, got licensed by the state and was hired by the city of Detroit in 1964, she said.

She worked a licensed practical nurse, a nurse who cares for people with disabilities or people who are ill, injured or convalescent. They work under the supervision of doctors or registered nurses, who perform similar jobs but are licensed nationally.

Parker retired in 1992. Since then, she's outlived one of her daughters, Pam, who died in December. Two of her children have also gone into medicine. Her first child, Wayman, is an OB/GYN in Milwaukee and her youngest, Katrina, is a pediatric endocrinologist in Atlanta.

She also has 14 grandchildren and eight great-grandchildren.

It wasn't too long ago Parker found out she had enough credits at WCCCD to graduate. Her first thought: "These people don't know what they're talking about."

But it was true and she's graduating Saturday. She isn't the only one who will stand out at WCCCD's graduation ceremony Saturday, either.

University of Michigan president Mark Schlissel will deliver the commencement address.

Meranda Sawabini, the mother of quadruplets, will also receive her nursing degree.

In addition, 10 students from Cass Technical High School and Chandler Park High School are graduating with associate's degrees coupled with their high school diplomas as part of the college's dual enrollment program.

"As we approach our 50th anniversary, education continues to be the key to achieving success," Curtis Ivery, the college's chancellor, said in a statement. "Our students leave with the assurance that they step forward into this changing society with the knowledge and tools they need to succeed."

Established by the Legislature in 1967, the district serves 72,000 students a year at its five campus locations across Wayne County.

Parker said she urges anyone thinking about starting college or going back to school to just jump in.

"My momma said you've got to work for what you get," she said. "If there's something you don't understand, find someone who does and get them to help you. If you lose your momentum, then you just get lost. Don't ever give up and don't cheat."

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