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## The next great adventure: WKU-O graduates 70

By Freddie Bourne Messenger-Inquirer  
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James Birkett poses for a photograph with his diploma on stage Tuesday evening during Western Kentucky University-Owensboro's graduate celebration in the Blandford Lecture Hall at Owensboro Community & Technical College.

Photo by Alan Warren, Messenger-Inquirer | [awarren@messenger-inquirer.com](mailto:awarren@messenger-inquirer.com)

The Donald J. Blandford Lecture Hall inside the Humanities Building on Owensboro Community & Technical College's main campus was decorated with black, red and white Tuesday evening in honor of celebrating Western Kentucky University-Owensboro's 70-person graduating class.

One of the earliest arrivals to the ceremony was Hartford resident Matthew Lindsey, who was looking forward to picking up his bachelor's degree.

A 2017 graduate of Ohio County High School, Lindsey, 24, attended OCTC and graduated in December 2019 — months prior to the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic — and decided “to wait a little bit” to continue his studies.

“Then I came back, took a couple classes at WKU-Owensboro to sort of ease back into it before going full time at Bowling Green (WKU's main campus),” he said. “... I've been taking classes at the Bowling Green campus for the past couple semesters.”

Following graduation, Lindsey plans to stay with WKU to attend graduate school to earn a master's degree in history, which he said most of which can be completed online.

“Pretty much (everything) about (history) fascinates me. There’s a lot of very interesting topics in it,” he said. “Right now, I’m fascinated about the world before World War I — everything from 1900 to 1914 and even the political sphere in Britain during (the war).”

Lindsey said “I really enjoyed my time” at WKU-O, especially with transitioning back into college after taking about two years off. He hopes to use his experiences to find employment in the education sector.

“My goal right now is to be a teacher,” he said. “I’m hoping to teach (at the) college level, university level ....”

For Owensboro resident Amanda O’Toole, who was graduating with her bachelor’s in organizational leadership, the ceremony is another stepping stone to her already growing educational trajectory.

“I did the JUMP (Joint Undergraduate Master’s Program) through Western, so I’m already halfway done with my master’s,” O’Toole, 39, said. “I have about another year, and this time next year I’ll be done with that.”

O'Toole is also getting a graduate certificate along with the degree for adult education in order to work with “the corporate (human resources) division for training and development, employment, succession planning and career coaching.”

“I’ve been in the workforce for a long time and the things that I’ve always kind of been driven towards is the training and the development of other people ...,” she said. “As I’ve gone through this journey, it kind of helped me navigate exactly where I wanted to land. And through some of my courses and things like that, it’s kind of helped me understand what I would need to do to (make that happen).”

Originally from South Dakota, O'Toole ended up going back to school when she moved to Owensboro enrolling at OCTC in 2018 and graduating in 2020. She then took a year off when she adopted her children before resuming her education.

O'Toole said “there isn’t such a thing as ‘too late’ ” in going back to school.

“My husband’s grandmother got her degree at 68 years old, so it can be done,” she said. “It’s hard and it’s a lot, but everybody’s different.”

Bryan Hamilton, the graduating student speaker, decided to go back to school after spending about four years working construction in Bowling Green and a two-decade career with the United States Navy, serving the nation on eight deployments.

The Daviess County High School graduate is looking to become an elementary school teacher after his experiences as a naval aviator and being part of the Blue Angels.

“... We would tour and go to different schools every week, and one summer I worked at an aerospace engineering summer camp for elementary school kids,” Hamilton, 47, said. “During that time, I decided that I really wanted to be an elementary school teacher because it was so much fun working with the kids.”

In his speech for his fellow graduates and those in attendance, Hamilton shared some wisdom he's received over the years.

“Some of the best advice that I ever got was probably from my grandfather, and he told me that ‘life is what happens when you’re busy making plans.’ That always kind of struck me because it took the pressure off,” he said. “I wasn’t worried about what was going on or anything like that; it was going to happen whether I planned for it or not — it’s the reactions that make the difference.”

Additional guidance Hamilton spoke about was “(making) the next right decision” and “(being) OK to fail, but you have to try.”

“If I gave up every time I failed, I would have missed some of the best parts of my life,” he said about the latter point.

“Failure is just an opportunity for your next great adventure.”

