

# 19 years of classes leads to UNCW degree



Donna Carlton walks from Morton Hall, where she works as an administrative assistant in the English Department, to her class on the campus of UNCW on Wednesday, Feb. 26, 2014.

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**Published: Thursday, February 27, 2014 at 10:48 a.m.**

**Last Modified: Thursday, February 27, 2014 at 10:48 a.m.**

Donna Carlton's Wednesday lunch plans were the same ones she's had for the past 19 years: Go to class.

Carlton, an administrative assistant in the English department at the University of North Carolina Wilmington, has spent the past two decades taking at least one class every semester. It started as a way to try something new, she said. But as she started racking up class after class, Carlton realized she'd be able to get her bachelor's degree.

She'll graduate this fall with a degree in sociology. And she already knows she'll miss her classes.

Before she came to [UNCW](#), Carlton had just 12 hours of college credit. She'd gone to community college for a year after high school, then taken a few computer classes while living in Boston. But mostly she'd focused on working. She'd spent several years as an administrative assistant in the U.S. Air Force, coordinating visits for military officials from other countries to meet with the Air Force's chief of staff.

In 1993, Carlton and her husband, who was in the Army and nearing retirement, decided to move back home. The pair are originally from Duplin County. Carlton started working at UNCW in January 1994. She took her first class about a year later – an 8 a.m. psychology lecture.

Carlton wasn't thrilled by the early start time – she's never taken another 8 a.m. class, she notes with a laugh – but she loved learning. So she kept on taking classes.

“Taking one class led into having 50 hours, and then 75 hours, and then 90 hours,” she said.

Before she knew it, she was on her way to a degree in sociology, a major she picked because she liked learning about people. Some of her favorite classes have been in the sociology department, including a class about how different cultures celebrate life and death and one that focused on local farmers.

Carlton has missed only two semesters in 19 years. She dropped her classes in spring 1997, when her father died, and in fall 2005, when her sister died. She has doubled up in the last few semesters, taking two classes instead of her usual one so she can finish her degree this fall. Her 14-year-old son will be starting his freshman year at Laney High School, she said, and she wants to be able to focus on him.

That's indicative of the kind of person Carlton is, said English department Chairman Don Bushman – persistent, caring, dedicated. Bushman and Carlton started working in the English department around the same time, and while Bushman said he always knew she was taking classes, it took him several years to realize that she was working toward a degree.

“A lot of the students know Donna in the office,” he said. But “I don't think the students know that Donna is also a student.”

Being a student is what Carlton says she'll miss the most when she's finished with her degree this fall.

“What am I going to do?” she said. “I won't miss writing a paper. But actually being in the class, learning – I'll miss that.”