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ON EDUCATION

A Late Start, but Not a Bad Start if the Student Is Finally Ready

By JOSEPH BERGER

NORTHAMPTON, Mass.

Jamie Nolan brushed off high school. Like many teenagers, she thought she knew more than her parents and teachers, and spent the time when she should have been in class hanging out with what she now laughingly calls the artistic crowd — the kids with pierced tongues and green hair who didn't actually produce very much art. Six months before graduation, she dropped out and, while living at home, in Larchmont, N.Y., spent the next six years buffing Porsches and Mercedes-Benzes for a car dealership and delivering them to their owners. Sometimes, she imagined the cars were hers, even though she ultimately realized she would never own one by working such jobs.

"I said to myself, this is all I'm going to be doing forever if I don't do something with my life," she recalled.

Ms. Nolan is now 28, a long-limbed, wheat-haired young woman with hopeful grayish blue eyes who retains something of the teenage rebel in the Yankee cap she slaps on backward. This onetime dropout is a senior at Smith College, bicycling around a campus gussied up in the gold and russet colors of a dazzling New England autumn, a place whose alumnae include [Barbara Bush](#), [Nancy Reagan](#), [Gloria Steinem](#) and Betty Friedan.

MS. NOLAN is a breathing, pulsing rebuff to parents who despair when their children meander off course and can't seem to find themselves, those who don't follow the classic trajectory of graduation by 22 and a high-paying job by 30. Such parents, she advises from her hard-earned experience, should realize that people follow starkly different arcs and timetables, so parents should "never give up on your kid."

“Just because your child can’t focus on their future when you want them to doesn’t mean they can’t far surpass your expectations when they really do focus,” she said.

When Ms. Nolan was ready to focus, there were places willing to offer her a second chance. After she got her high school equivalency diploma, [Westchester Community College](#), a 30-minute drive from home, let her show off her gifts as a student and her leadership talents as head of the student government.

Then Smith took her into its Ada Comstock Scholars Program, an admission avenue that seems to escape the notice of families who think of Seven Sisters or other selective schools as exclusively for the elite 18-to-22 set. The 31-year-old program, like similar ones at Mount Holyoke and Wellesley, has long recognized that people flower at different paces and that the vagaries of life can trip up even the most fastidious wish lists.

There are 200 Ada Comstock students — one of every 13 Smith students — ranging in age from their early 20’s into their 60’s. They have all kinds of reasons for having stumbled off the well-trod paths of life. Some, like Rita McCoubrey, 23, of Santa Ana, Calif., had babies in high school; others, like Ellie Crews, 53, of Seattle, married husbands who insisted that their careers came first, and so they raised children into adulthood.

Many colleges, like [Columbia University](#)’s School of General Studies and [Harvard](#)’s Extension School, have programs for such late-bloomers. But seldom are such students as fully integrated into the campus’s lifeblood as they are at Smith.

There, the Adas, as they call themselves, take classes and live in dorms with all the other students as well as write for the newspaper, sing in the choir and row for the crew. There are some differences: Adas can take fewer courses per semester and are given more time to graduate.

The program took 52 percent of its applicants last year, and if this class is the same as others, more than 90 percent of them will graduate.

“The faculty loves having Adas in class,” said Erika Laquer, the dean who runs the program. “They’re really motivated. They know exactly why they’re there. And they have personal development issues worked out.”

Because the students are older, Ms. Laquer has more than a few times had to fit chemotherapy into the schedules of those who have had breast cancer. The discouragement that defeated the Adas earlier in life sometimes rears up, so Ms. Laquer must remind them: “You can do it. That’s why we admitted you.” She has noticed another difference from younger students: “The Adas typically want to go to bed a lot earlier.”

Ms. Nolan’s story is one that should console parents of drifting youngsters. A firefighter’s daughter whose parents divorced when she was 8, she described herself as “the kind of the kid who knew everything and talked back.”

“The school counselor, the principal and especially my mother went through hell with me,” she said. While the job at the car dealership was leaving her empty, she kept her eye on a friend attending Sarah Lawrence. “I said to myself: ‘Why can’t I be doing the same thing. Why is driving somebody else’s Porsche around all I’m worth?’ ”

At Westchester Community, she discovered her inner egghead and attained a 3.7 average. With luck, she figured, she might enter a state college. “I didn’t have a great deal of confidence in myself,” she said.

But she was accepted as a transfer student by Georgetown and the [University of Virginia](#), with a full scholarship, as well as by Smith, where her scholarship virtually covered her bill. “When I got the full scholarship to Georgetown and U. Va., I cried,” she said. “I kept turning to my mother with the acceptance letters, freaking out and thinking this was a mistake. I actually called Georgetown and asked them if they made a mistake. It was the fact that I went from an absolute zero.”

Smith has been far from a cakewalk; she’s often up until 5 in the morning to get her reading done. “I look at this as an extreme sport and I’ve got to do it,” she said. “I love learning. I’m like a sponge. I’m like the nerdy kid in high school who wanted to learn everything.” With her working-class roots at a campus that draws more than a few bluebloods, she has sometimes felt “like I was on another planet.” But she determined that she was not going to “turn myself into a person obsessed with classism.”

Her tables have been turned, yes, but only because she is now ready to be a serious student, one who is even boring in on a career in law.

“If I had gone straight from high school to college, I would have flunked out and that would have been the end of it,” she said. “Because the person I was back then is not the person I am today.”

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