

It took 23 years, but this mom of six finally got her college degree

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May 13, 2018 06:00 AM

Updated May 13, 2018 12:00 PM

Octavia Anderson repeated the mantra to her six kids.

"If you open that door, you have to close it."

She took night classes at Miami Dade College's North campus when she could, in between working full-time, fighting for public housing and raising her children, watching each one go through school.

Finally, it was her turn to close the door.

Anderson, 50, earned her bachelor's degree in criminal justice — 23 years after she took her first class.

She closed the door with her son, Phillip Hardemon, 30, and nephew Kendrick Watson, 22. All three donned caps and gowns and graduated together at the University of Miami's Watsco Center on May 5.

"I completed something that I started and that was always my intent," Anderson said. "And that's just who I am. If I start something, it might be slow in coming but most likely I'll complete it."

It was 1993, and 26-year-old Anderson was nervous that the warehouse where she worked would go out of business. She had six babies at home, ranging from newborn to 9 years old.

With the kids in school, she went back and got her GED. She enrolled in an accounting certificate program two years later at MDC's North campus, a short bus ride away from the housing project where she lived near Gwen Cherry Park.

But accounting wasn't for her. She landed a part-time job in the copy center on campus.

She was drawn to corrections and criminal justice. She even passed the physical agility test. The state offered her a job in Doral, but Anderson, dependent on a nearby bus line, wasn't sure she could get to work on time.

She turned it down, and the copy center became her full-time job. She focused on making sure each of her kids graduated high school and went on to college.

Anderson still spent time on the North campus, but only because all six kids attended there. There wasn't enough time for her own studies.

When Anderson's youngest daughter graduated from Florida Atlantic University in 2014, it was time for Anderson to head back to class.

"With nobody to usher out or stay on top off, I went back to school," she said. She took two classes at a time.

She ended up in an advanced composition class with her son, Phillip, who is also the cousin of Miami City Commissioner Keon Hardemon.

"I felt like we achieved something together," he said. "Going to school is the way of finding our way in the world around us. Me and my momma have found a way to be ourselves and still achieve."

Even with a degree in hand, Anderson isn't looking for a career change. She's back at work in the copy center on campus.

"I don't know what the future holds, but right now, Miami Dade North is home."



Octavia Anderson at her graduation ceremony at Miami Dade College. After 23 years, Octavia Anderson received her bachelor's degree in criminal justice. The 50-year-old mother of six graduated with her son and nephew. She'll celebrate Mother's Day as a college graduate.