



MIAMI-DADE COUNTY

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These moms are getting college degrees alongside their kids

BY HOWARD COHEN

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Gloria Jimenez is putting five of her seven daughters through college. That, alone, would task any working mom. Instead, she's joined them at Miami Dade College — and raced past them, becoming the first to earn a college degree.

Damaris Hall completed six tours of duty with the Air Force Reserve. Now she's getting a master's in national security at Nova Southeastern University — alongside her master's-seeking son.

Naghmen Taherian and daughter Tara could soon be opening their first mother-daughter dentistry clinic. They're both in dental school at NSU.

Nyamekye Daniel wakes at 3 a.m. to edit news stories from fellow students at Florida International University. That's what you do when you're a single mother of two fulfilling a lifelong goal to become a journalist.

Daniel's children — at 11 and not-yet 2 — are too young to join her on campus. But Jimenez, Taherian and Hall are part of a trend: Mothers who've gone back to college — or are enrolled for the first time — at the same time their kids are attending classes.

"It's not too late to start something new," Taherian said. "Every day is one opportunity for us to continue something or learn something new."

Read more: A Mother's Day roundup of events around Miami-Dade

Today, nearly 4 percent of undergraduate women have dependents in college, according to a 2011-12 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study by the U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. Among graduate students, that number tops 7 percent. In both cases, more women than men can make that claim.

Read more: Suggested brunch spots in Miami-Dade to take mom

Mom graduates first

Five of Gloria Galasso Jimenez's seven daughters are enrolled at Miami Dade College.

Mom had a message for them: "I told the girls, 'I'm beating you guys! You guys are taking too much time off in the summers.'"

Jimenez, 53, walked to the stage at MDC's graduation ceremony two weeks ago to collect her conditional diploma representing a bachelor's degree in business. Her GPA: 3.79.

(Conditional because she has another class to take in the summer but the school only holds one commencement per year.)

Her kids were there to cheer her on — from their seats.

Carla, 27, the eldest, is a couple classes from earning her education degree. The others are in various stages of completion. Gabriella (Gabby), 26, and Victoria, 24, are both on the nursing track. Juliet, 22, is also studying education. Dominique, 19, wants to be a chef.

Lily, 17, and Analeigh, 16, are still in high school.

"I kind of feel bad that I said that because by no means did I want to make them feel bad," Jimenez said hours before her graduation. "You know how kids are. They want to take the summers off. But me, being older, I wanted to get this done while I still have my brain cells intact."

She laughs.

"That became the in-joke in the house — that I'm an overachiever. I get crazy about my grades."



Graduates from Miami Dade College's Homestead campus celebrate on the Kendall Campus after Ryder's Robert E. Sanchez's commencement speech on April 29, 2017. Gloria Jimenez, whose five daughters also attend MDC, is second from the right.

Cristian Lazzari - Miami Dade College

Jimenez, a business technology consultant at Baptist Health South Florida, went to college after her supervisors encouraged her to get her bachelor's to progress with the company. After graduating from Miami Palmetto Senior High in 1981, she considered barber college but got married and worked at Christ Fellowship in Palmetto Bay for 13 years before joining Baptist in 2009.

"Luckily, or unluckily, I pursued education later in life," she said. "The kids were older. I had a really good support system at the house. I had kids that drove. They knew how to cook and help around the house. It wasn't easy but made it more doable than if I started when I was younger."

So is there peer pressure when your mom is suddenly your peer?

Not among this bunch.

"For sure I believed she would graduate before me," said Gabby. "Once my mom has a goal in her mind, she will complete it."

Juliet loves the camaraderie. The Palmetto Bay family often studies together. "I think it's awesome what she's doing. Really brave. She can help me and I can help her. Nice teamwork."

Juliet wasn't surprised her mother zipped by her to the graduation line. She took a year off after high school. "I take my time doing things," she said.

What Juliet *is* surprised about, however, is mom's popularity on Miami Dade's Homestead campus. "She has this group of friends I didn't even know she had. College friends. I go straight to my classes and leave. Mom's talking to all these people. ' . She's living the college life and having fun on campus. *She's good!*'"

Shared bite out of education



Naghmeh Taherian, left, shares a laugh with her daughter Tara Derakhshandeh at Nova Southeastern University-NSU Dental Program, where they both study dentistry together at the dental clinic on Friday, April 28, 2017.

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As a child in her native Iran in the late 1960s and '70s, Naghmeh Taherian adored her dentist. She calmly explained everything she was about to do to her young patient. There was never pain. So when Taherian would get home after a visit, she'd place her dolls around her and give them the same treatment.

"I'd say, 'Open your mouth, I'm going to clean you now.'"

Years later, when Taherian, now 50, weighed medical or dental school, she remembered her dentist.

For 13 years, Taherian practiced dentistry in Iran — often with her daughter, Tara Derakhshandeh, doing homework and playing "dentist" with her own dolls in her mother's office.

"I'd see the interaction between the patients and my mom, that level of confidence, and that was inspiring to me," said Derakhshandeh, 28. "At the same time, she was working at home as a housewife and taking care of everything and that was in my mind: Maybe I should follow her. I was interested in science so I decided to go to dental school."

In 2010, the family moved to Houston. There, Derakhshandeh went to middle and high school. After graduating from college, she decided on dental school. Both mom and daughter toured NSU and decided its three-year International Program for Dental Graduates program would be a good fit for Derakhshandeh.

And for mom — who had to get her certification to practice dentistry in the United States.

Now, both are third-year dental school students at NSU. Mom is Tara's study mate, clinical partner and mentor. After they graduate in 2018, both foresee opening a dental practice together.

"It's really enjoyable for us together," Taherian said.

Mom has the practical skills from having practiced dentistry but the paperwork is different in Iran compared to the States. Daughter has the language and computer skills.

"We are studying together. I'm trying to help her with patients and she helps me with other projects, like the computer," Taherian said.



Naghmeh Taherian, left, works on a dental patient as her daughter Tara Derakhshandeh assists her at Nova Southeastern University-NSU Dental Program, where they both study dentistry together on Friday, April 28, 2017.

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"If you have someone from your relations by your side it is a big help," her daughter agreed. "In the clinic, when you work on a patient, the faculty is not helping the whole time. So having her was a big opportunity. Whenever I have a complicated patient, she comes to sit next to me."

The patients at the NSU dental clinic tell Derakhshandeh, “We would like to be with the mother and daughter.”

Tour of (school) duty



Damaris Hall, 58 who is graduating with her master's degree from CAHSS in National Security Affairs at Nova Southeastern University is pictured with her son, James Hall, 23, who is also a student at NSU at the H. Wayne Huizenga College of Business and Entrepreneurship working on his M.B.A. in International Business. Damaris has completed six tours of duty in the U.S. Air Force in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Emirates and Kyrgyzstan and will be graduating in June.

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Damaris Hall vowed she was going to make it in America when she left her native Panama for Miami in 1978. “I always took things that were challenging,” she said. “If that person can do it, I can do it.”

In June, Hall, a Miami police officer and a member of the U.S. Air Force Reserve, will earn her master's in national security from NSU. “I've been deployed six times and I learned more and more about national security affairs and the growth in terrorism. So I decided to pursue a master's degree in national securities affairs,” she said.

Her youngest son, James Hall, 23, is a full-time student at NSU and working on his master's in international business, with an expected graduation date in spring 2019.

Her formula for success: helping others, even in risky situations.

Hall, 58, tried New York but missed the tropical weather and returned to Miami. She spent 11 years as a paramedic— delivered eight babies in a row, she said. “I liked it, felt rewarded, felt I did something for someone. Then EMT wasn't enough so I tried the police. Then, when that wasn't enough, I went to the military.”

Hall, a 22-year officer with the Miami police department, plans to retire in May 2018. A month later, she will retire from the Air Force after 31 years of service. The Miami PD gave Hall leave time to serve six tours of duty in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Emirates and Kyrgyzstan.

"I had help with my son from my husband and a cousin who retired, and they were helping me with my son throughout his high school while I was gone. We stayed in touch. I helped him with his Spanish homework while I was abroad. The internet is one of the great things," Hall said.

(She also has an older son, Ricardo Maynard, 42, who is in the medical field in San Antonio. He, like his mother, served in the Air Force.)

"I was proud of her," said son James. Growing up, he said, "was a little bit different when your mom wasn't around. But it's been particularly interesting to me to see how she was able to come back and pursue her education. I think that had a major impact on me."

Today, mother and son study together. You can sometimes catch them at Starbucks working on their papers and research projects.

"I think we are alike. We take education very seriously," James said.



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Both are looking forward to her graduation after Mother's Day,

"I've seen my mom graduate many times. It'll be another graduation but, of course, I always feel proud of her."

Indeed, she plans to enter a doctorate program in the conflict resolution and analysis field.

"What you put your mind to, you can do, no matter what. I'm a prime example. The cons are it's not easy with family. But if you have a supportive family, you can pull through."

An inspiring mom

Braylon, Nyamekye Daniel's son, not yet 2, is having none of his mother's phone interview.

"Give me a few moments, let me get the baby," she asks as sounds of crying compete on the telephone line. A little cuddling. Braylon's happy again. Mom can tell her story.



Nyamekye Daniel, 31, celebrates her graduation from Florida International University with her children Nyla Daniel, 11, left, and Braylon Betts, 1.

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She takes a breath. It's not an easy story to tell.

Daniel, now 31, lost her father to diabetes after moving to Miami from Barbados as a teenager in 1998.

In 2005, her fiancé was murdered. A year later, her 2-year-old son Dakari died. Her then-boyfriend was initially charged with first-degree murder but acquitted in a three-day trial in 2008.

In 2010, Daniel lost her mother. Her parents had divorced when she was young and she didn't grow up with her mom.

The pain from all of that never goes away. Cope, she would tell herself.

The years since have been for rebuilding — for mother and her now 11-year-old daughter Nyla. She's been on a 14-year mission to get her college degree. On May 3, she graduated from Florida International University with a bachelor's in journalism. She made the Dean's List.

"What helps me cope, what gives me a more positive outlook on things, is my daughter. I needed to set a good example for her," Daniel said.

As she juggled school and motherhood, Daniel worked as managing editor of the South Florida News Service, which provides FIU students the opportunity to publish stories with local news outlets, including the Miami Herald. Daniel's recent stories included articles on the presidential election and its aftermath in South Florida.

Her strategy? "I try to be as organized as possible," she said. "When you have a toddler you have to plan ahead."

Her goal now is to become a working journalist. She also wants to earn a master's and a doctorate to fulfill a longer-term goal of becoming a communications professor.

"I didn't become a statistic. I didn't lose it. I didn't give up. No matter what, I kept going," Daniel said. "Single mother, or not, you can still be successful and do whatever you want. Don't let others define you. Define yourself."



On Wednesday, May 3, 2017 Nyamekye Daniel, 31, center, earns her Bachelor of Science and celebrates with her children Nyla Daniels, 11, right, and Braylon Betts, 1, left, after overcoming many tragic moments in her life.

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