

Texas Construction Consultant, Miss. Native Finally Earns UM Engineering Degree After 40 Years

OXFORD, Miss. – By donning a cap and gown and accepting his diploma in civil engineering at the University of Mississippi Saturday, Richard Stone, 59, completed a journey he began more than 40 years ago.

Stone's bachelor's degree in civil engineering is a long time coming, delayed twice by military service, working life and five children.

The 1962 graduate of Laurel High School and 2004 UM graduate began his academic career at Mississippi State University, only to have it cut short in 1966 when he was drafted into the Army as the war in Vietnam escalated.

That same year, he married Linda Shank of Jackson. Luckily for the young couple, Stone was stationed at Ft. Bragg, N.C., for his two-year stint instead of a jungle in Southeast Asia.

In 1968, Stone was discharged and went to work for Mitchell Engineering Company in Columbus. But it still bothered him that he hadn't completed college, he said. So he enrolled in the School of Engineering at the University of Mississippi in fall 1969.

That same year, his oldest son, Matthew, was born. In 1971, Jeff was born and Mitchell Engineering Company offered Stone, the young father of two, a substantial promotion.

"I lacked 12 credit hours to graduate," Stone said. "But I couldn't afford to turn down a promotion to plant manager."

So reluctantly, Stone left Ole Miss behind. The plant manager position was only the first of many promotions for Stone, who eventually became an independent construction consultant and moved his family – five children in all – to Harlingen, Texas. He had been successful without it, but Stone still wanted his college degree.

Then last year, after completing a 10-year project, Stone's employer gave him an extra year's pay.

"I just thought if there was ever a time to do it, this was it," Stone said. "And here I am."

So with their two youngest children enrolled at the University of Texas, Stone set out for Oxford in January to finish his last semester of college at the University of Mississippi. He and his wife rented an apartment in Oxford, and Stone got down to business.

“My wife accused me of living at the School of Engineering,” Stone said, laughing. “It was quite an adjustment.”

Stone, who was accustomed to performing civil engineering tasks on construction sites, now faced performing them in theoretical computer simulations with colleagues the age of his children. The arrangement worked out well, Stone said.

“In my engineering classes, I had done a lot of the things we were studying in the field,” Stone said. “So other students would sometimes come and ask me questions. I had a lot of practical knowledge to offer, and they really seemed to appreciate that.”

Although Stone had not been in a classroom in 30 years, he jumped right back in with nary a bobble – his GPA this semester should be around 3.8, if his final exams go as expected.

“Richard Stone’s dedication to higher education is an inspiration to all students,” said Dr. Alex Cheng, chair of UM’s civil engineering department. “In order to come back to Ole Miss, he had to change his life, but it was all worth it. He’s finally earned his degree, and he earned it with distinction. We’re very proud of his accomplishments.”

Stone’s three oldest sons, Matthew, 34, of Mobile, Ala; Jeff, 33, of Oxford; and Trey, 30, also of Mobile, attended Stone’s graduation along with his four grandchildren. Stone’s wife, Linda, faced a decision no mother should ever have to make, and chose to attend their 21-year-old daughter Mary’s graduation from the University of Texas.

Stone, the newly minted Ole Miss alumnus, says he plans to take his degree and go back to work. “I’ve still got one kid to put through college,” he said. He would like to move back home to Mississippi at some point, though.

“This is just a great moment for me. It’s something that I always regretted, not having finished my education,” Stone said. “No I can say I filled the one void that I had in my life.

“It’s a great feeling.”