

San Diego Union-Tribune
5/26/17

Teens — and a tween! — are graduating from community colleges

By Gary Warth

Tim Lewis and his wife and Simone de Bruyne-Lewis knew early on there was something special about their daughter, Claire.

At Paloma Elementary in San Marcos, Claire was helping other students with their school work. At home, she was trying to teach herself Beethoven's "Für Elise" on the piano after listening to it repeatedly on the preschool show "Little Einsteins," before she started taking lessons at age 6.

Claire was growing restless and wanted to learn at her own pace, but her parents were reluctant to home-school their only daughter.

"As a parent, I didn't know how I was going to be a teacher," Simone Lewis said. "I can't keep up with her. She's too fast for me."

They agreed to enter her in a home school program through Pathways Academy, but her mother said she wanted some additional support, so when Claire was 10 she took her to Palomar College to see if she qualified for any classes.

On Friday, wearing a Phi Theta Kappa stole in recognition of her 4.0 grade point average, Claire became the youngest student to ever graduate from Palomar College at age 13, having earned an Associate of Science degree in general studies with an emphasis on science and mathematics.

"I'm really excited," she said the morning of the ceremony. "It took me three years, but it's finally here. I can't believe it's happening."

Claire is one of three remarkably young students graduating this year from community colleges in the county.

Kyle Litzenberg, 15, graduated from MiraCosta on Friday with an a degree in computer science and another in math and science.

Leilani Trautman, 16, plans to graduate June 7 from Grossmont College, where she earned four degrees.

There have been other young graduates from community colleges in the area, including Nicolas Pini, who graduated last summer just shy of his 15th birthday.

At Southwestern College two years ago, 13-year-old sisters Edna and Lara Stewart and their 15-year-old sister, Carla, were all enrolled at the school. Carla graduated Friday.

But while young community college graduates have happened occasionally, having three from different schools in the same year could be a first.

Claire Lewis said she took a different path because she felt her traditional school was taking more time than she needed to learn things.

"I just wanted to switch to home school so I could learn a little bit faster," she said. "It was a lot faster, it turned out."

Before enrolling in home school, Claire took assessment tests at Palomar College in the summer after fifth grade. She scored 99 out of 99 on writing and 97 out of 99 on reading. Her math score was high enough for beginning algebra, the first Palomar class she took at age 10.

"I went to my first class and I was kind of nervous because there were so many older people and I didn't really know how to talk to them," Claire said. "Everyone was looking at me at first and was like, 'What is she doing here?'"

People were curious and asked her how old she was, but Claire said everyone was nice.

"They all talked to me during breaks before and after class," she said. "At each class I had a couple of friends I talked to each time."

At Palomar, Claire took classes in math, history, English, geography, geology and other subjects, with some units counting as high school credits.

Claire taught herself home school classes that included literature, vocabulary, world history, economics and other subjects. She said she studied on her own with books, and also took online classes to learn German.

She studied until bedtime, with only a few hours to herself each day.

"I really love studying," she said. "I love learning. It's one of my favorite things to do. It feels amazing when you learn something new."

While her degree has a science and math emphasis, Claire's passion is music. She plays violin, guitar, flute, clarinet, cello and ukulele, and for five years has been a violinist with the San Diego Civic Youth Orchestra,

She plans to attend a music conservatory but first will take a year off before returning to school to earn a bachelor's degree in piano performance and a master's in conducting, with the dream of one day leading an orchestra.

While she didn't get to experience high school or the social aspects of college, Claire said she made the right decision.

"I feel like I missed out a little bit, but I think it was worth it," Claire said. "I got to learn at my own pace and have more time for music, so I'm really happy it turned out to be exactly what I wanted."

Pat Stall, director of the School of Education at CSU San Marcos, said very young graduates from community colleges are uncommon, but they may increase in the near future as students have more opportunities to get ahead.

"With dual enrollment, online and charter schools with personalized learning that lets students go at their own pace, it's entirely possible for students who are motivated and very bright to go through their high school curriculum and community college," she said. "It's rare, but I don't think it's going to be very rare in the future."

Still, she said, the students have to be motivated to succeed.

Kyle Litzenberg had that type of motivation when he entered MiraCosta College as its youngest student ever when he was 13 in 2014.

Now 15, Kyle has earned two degrees and is headed to CSU San Marcos.

"I think that first semester was like culture shock," said Kyle, who had been home-schooled before enrolling in MiraCosta. "I had never gone through a public school before. But after the first two semesters, I found my groove pretty easily."

The load was heavier than expected and resulted in a third year at MiraCosta, but Kyle said he is back on track to graduate from CSU San Marcos in 2019, around the time his friends are graduating high school.

Kyle said being so young at school was an interesting experience, but it never was a factor when dealing with other students. It also didn't hurt Kyle had a growth spurt that brought him to about 6 foot, 3 inches.

Kyle said he didn't regret missing out on parties with other community college students and doesn't think things will be different at CSU San Marcos, but has some regrets about missing high school.



Kyle Litzenberg, 15, shown with parents Daniel and Santosha Litzenberg, had a growth spurt since entering MiraCosta College in 2014. (Nelvin C. Cepeda)

“But to be honest, everybody’s experiences are different,” he said. “I did what’s best for me. I feel some times I might have missed out by not building on my friendships in high school, but honestly, I feel I made the right choice.

Stall said the trend of more young students graduating from community college could have a down side because students will miss out on the social experiences of high school and college. Then again, students who are bright and self-motivated are likely to be bored if they hold themselves back, she said.

“By and large, moving ahead is probably more practical and, in the long run, valuable,” she said.

At Grossmont College, Leilani Trautman is graduating with four degrees in math, physics, natural science and computer science.

“I’m just so proud of her, I want to scream it to the world,” said her mother, Lillian Trautman.

Leilani’s skills in math became clear as early as kindergarten, when her teacher noticed she could count to 100 while other students were learning to count to 30. She asked for extra homework in elementary school, and after going through the most advanced math classes at Valhalla High, she enrolled in 11th grade at Grossmont Middle College to take more.

She’s also been taking classes at Grossmont College, and said she was a little nervous at first because everyone would be older.

“I thought it would be really strange and people would think it was really weird,” she said. “But I think people really gravitated toward me. They thought I knew what I was doing.”

She did. Besides earning four degrees, Leilani was the lead author on a paper she wrote with a physics professors on double stars, or stars that are appear close together.

“In the long term I want a career in engineering,” Leilani said, adding her dream job would be at NASA or Google.

She’s been accepted to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and she received a merit scholarship from Raytheon.

“To some extent I’m nervous, but I think it’s fairly common for people to be younger when they go to MIT,” she said.
“Going away for the first time will be a bit of a change, and I’ll be enjoying the classes.”