

City grandmother of 11 among BC3 Class of 2021 grads

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Toni Gilmore, 57, of New Castle, is a member of Butler County Community College's Class of 2021. Gilmore is a grandmother of 11 who earned a certificate in a 38-credit medical assistant program offered at BC3 @ Lawrence Crossing in New Castle. She is shown Friday, May 14, 2021, with her grandson, Mikai, 5, of New Castle.

(New Castle, PA) A 57-year-old New Castle grandmother of 11 who answers to terms of endearment such as "Nina," "Nana" and "Nanny" is among the expected 461 graduates in Butler County Community College's Class of 2021.

Toni Gilmore, a 1982 graduate of New Castle Junior-Senior High School, will receive a certificate in a 38-credit medical assistant program offered at BC3 @ Lawrence Crossing in New Castle.

"It's like I am still in disbelief," Gilmore said. "I never thought at my age I would go back to school. And then to graduate."

During a break one day in her 39th year of working as a certified nursing assistant, she phoned her husband, Ronald.

“After work, I am not going to come right home,” she said she recalls telling Ronald. “I am going to out to BC3.”

BC3 @ Lawrence Crossing in New Castle is the only of BC3’s five additional locations in counties that include Armstrong, Butler, Jefferson and Mercer to offer a two-year associate degree program and a one-year certificate program in medical assistant.

BC3’s medical assistant students are educated in administrative tasks such as updating medical records, coding insurance documents, scheduling appointments, billing and bookkeeping; and clinical tasks such as recording medical histories, assisting physicians with medical procedures, drawing blood and wound care, according to Alyssa Dietz, director of the college’s medical assistant program.

BC3 @ Lawrence Crossing “inspired me”

Graduates of BC3’s medical assistant program can serve as a phlebotomist; EKG, medical laboratory, ophthalmology or emergency care technician; or as a telemedicine associate, among other positions, Dietz said.

Her body, Gilmore said, had felt the effects of working nearly four decades in nursing homes in Lawrence County.

“I love taking care of people,” she said. “When I was a CNA, I would have residents tell me how good I made them feel. I did it because I felt like the elderly needed someone to take care of them in their last stages, because a lot of times, CNAs are all they have.

“There are a lot of them who don’t have families.”

But after two back surgeries, she said she recalls thinking “I’m going to try something different. I’ll still be caring for people. I just won’t be doing the physical work.”

That something different was the medical assistant certificate program at BC3 @ Lawrence Crossing, where she said she “felt like part of a family. They’re so warm and welcoming. The advisers. The professors. Even the students. It’s just one big family.

“They inspired me. I had self-doubt. Here I am, almost 60 years old. What am I doing? I was always the oldest one in class. And they let me know that your age does not define who you are or what you can do.”

Also inspired by her achievement are grandchildren Arri, Gabriella, Gage, Giovanni, Kalin, Kasiah, Katlynn, Mikai, Nevaeh, Nylah and Ronald.

Granddaughter, 10, “super, super proud”

Nevaeh, 10, a fourth-grader in the Union Area School District, said to Gilmore: “‘You go to school.’ And I said, ‘I do go to school.’ And she said, ‘Nina, I am so proud of you.’ She said, ‘I told my teacher that my Nina goes to college and my Nina is graduating and I am super, super proud of it.’”

Gilmore is also among the 30 percent of graduates in BC3’s Class of 2021 who are age 25 or older; and among the 70 percent of graduates in BC3’s Class of 2021 who will graduate debt-free.

She will next take the American Association of Medical Assistants’ certified medical assistant examination, a test in which 100 percent of BC3’s 2020 summer medical assistant graduates were successful, according to Dietz.

A 19 percent increase in job openings for medical assistants is expected through 2029, according to the U.S. Department of Labor’s Bureau of Labor Statistics. The median salary in 2019 for medical assistants was \$35,850, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Health care and social assistance organizations as of April employed the highest percentage of workers among industries in Lawrence County at 20.7 percent, according to the state Department of Labor & Industry’s Center for Workforce Information and Analysis.

The college’s 53rd commencement will be held May 19. BC3 is expecting to award 436 associate degrees and 46 certificates or workplace certificates, according to Becky Smith, BC3’s associate director of records and registration.

John Dougan, 64, of Kittanning, is expected to be the most-senior graduate in BC3’s Class of 2021 with an associate degree in accounting.