It’s never too late to graduate

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Henry St. Paul became one of the oldest graduates to earn a Freeman School MBA when he graduated in 2008.

Henry St. Paul knew it would take time to earn enough credits to get a master of business administration degree when he started night classes at Tulane. He just never thought it would take 53 years.

On May 17, 2008, 53 years after starting the MBA program, Henry St. Paul crossed the stage in McAlister Auditorium along with 187 fellow graduates of the A. B. Freeman School of Business, finally receiving his master of business administration degree. At 81, St. Paul is one of oldest people in Tulane's history to earn an MBA.

"He has worked very hard," says Angelo DeNisi, dean of the Freeman School. "I think it's great that he can do this after all these years."

St. Paul, who now lives in Pass Christian, Miss., earned his bachelor's degree in engineering from Tulane in 1946. That year he started work at an industrial supply company that agreed to pay for night classes so he could earn a graduate degree in business.

"My original idea was, an engineering degree was great, but they're a dime a dozen," St. Paul says. "If I am going to get anywhere, I've got to have something more than an undergraduate degree. I've got to show that I have a knowledge of business."

St. Paul took classes during the next several years. When he was one credit shy of his degree, he took a break to start his own industrial supply business with a co-worker.

"When we started the business, I said that I would stay out a semester or two," St. Paul adds. "Of course, the semester or two came to be about 53 years."

During that time, he and his business partner ran Service Engineering Co., a successful distributor of pumping, compressing and materials handling equipment. At its peak, the company employed 69 people in offices in New Orleans and Mobile, Ala. In 1983, St. Paul sold the venture. He also owned computer retail shops and, in later years, worked in the engineering consulting business with his son.

Last year, St. Paul contacted DeNisi to ask if it was possible to submit a thesis to earn his last credit for an MBA. DeNisi agreed, saying that St. Paul's years of experience running a successful business would give him ample material for a thesis. "Everything he needs to know about getting an MBA, he knows," DeNisi says. "He had taken all the courses and run his own business for years."

What does St. Paul plan to do with his new degree? "I'll put it on my resume and hope somebody will give me a job or give me something to do," he says with a laugh. "I can't stand doing nothing."

--Keith Brannon