

Edmonton man, 90, graduates high school with grandson

Walter Ross served two terms as a University of Alberta senator

Chris Purdy, The Canadian Press

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Walter Ross, 90, graduates high school (Jason Franson/CP)

EDMONTON – Walter Ross always wanted to finish high school, and on Thursday night he shuffled across a stage to celebrate his graduation — right after his grandson.

The 90-year-old was recently granted his diploma after leaving high school when he 15. The province finally credited him with the French course he never passed.

The Edmonton man was then invited to join more than 300 teenagers from St. Francis Xavier High School as they pulled on caps and gowns Thursday night to get ready for the next phase of their lives.

He arrived at the Northlands Expo Centre leaning on a cane but beamed with pride as family members helped him into his navy robe and mortarboard, then into a loaner wheelchair for a long ride down the hall to the auditorium.

Parents and students gave him a standing ovation as he slowly made his way inside and took his seat beside his grandson with the rest of the teens.

The long ceremony, which proceeded in alphabetical order, was halted briefly while officials told Ross's story. He stood in the wings and listened intently while seeming to plot out his course toward the lecturn, his cane at the ready.

Suddenly, his name was called and the crowd leapt to their feet once more. Both grandfather and grandson stood on stage, soaking in the adulation and posing for pictures, before moving along and letting the ceremony resume.

"I love young people," Ross declared after it was over. "This is a wonderful group of kids. The young men are handsome, the young women are beautiful. What could be better?"

Asked what he was thinking about as he made that long, halting trip across the stage, he admitted he couldn't really remember.

"I'm just glad I got through the whole thing without embarrassing anybody," he said with a smile.

In an interview before graduation night, Ross, a spry, old-fashioned gent with hearing aids in both ears, talked about working for 55 years as an insurance salesman, raising seven kids on his own and welcoming 24 grandchildren into the world.

Ross grew up in Duffield, a hamlet about 70 kilometres west of Alberta's capital, and lived above his parents' general store.

His father had a heart attack when Ross was 15 and in Grade 10. With his two brothers in the army during the Second World War, he left school to care for his dad and look after the family business.

But his education was important to him and he spent many nights studying and completed classes through correspondence.

A few years later, after his father died, he tried again to get his diploma and received special permission from the Alberta government to write his Grade 12 exams. He crammed with tutors for six weeks and passed all the classes he needed but one: French.

“I was disappointed, of course,” recalled Ross. “My mother was French.”

Life went on and Ross married, then divorced, and became a single father. He eventually remarried and has been with his wife, Eileen, for the last 33 years.

He joined the Loyal Edmonton Regiment militia and rose through the ranks to commanding officer. He served two terms as a senator with the University of Alberta, although he never told officials there he didn’t finish high school.

“Some of them even thought I was a bit smart,” he said with a laugh.

Despite his accomplishments, Ross still felt dogged by that missing diploma. And at his 90th birthday party in January, he announced to a table full of family that he had a new project — completing Grade 12.

He didn’t go back to school, though. A cousin helped him apply to the province and officials granted him a pass on the missing high school course, giving him credits instead for “life experience.”

His diploma recently arrived in the mail and three city high schools invited him to join their commencement ceremonies. He chose the one where he knew a fellow student.

His 17-year-old grandson, Jeff Ross, still has to finish a few exams, but plans to study physics in the fall at the University of Calgary, while training full-time in the Olympic Oval speed-skating program. The teen said he jumped at the chance to share his graduation day with his grandpa.

“I just think it’s awesome. My dad graduated a long time ago. This way I can share it with my grandpa and we can kind of full circle it.”

The elder Ross said having his diploma doesn’t mean he’s going to stop learning. He’s still taking French lessons, because he’s no quitter.

“I’ve got to do it this year, ’cause next year I’ve got to learn to play the piano.”