



Bobby Morris ('05) joins his wife Sylvia ('58) as an official alumnus of Union University. Morris completed his degree 50 years after a failed economics course left him two credit hours short of graduation

TWO HOURS SHORT NO LONGER

AFTER 50 YEARS, MORRIS FINALLY COMPLETES COLLEGE DEGREE

B Y T I M E L L S W O R T H

Bobby Morris would be the envy of most men his age. But for 50 years, one regret in his life has gnawed at him nearly every day.

It's true he and his wife Sylvia ('58) have been happily married for almost 50 years. Their two children, Eric and Crystal, have sung for dignitaries from across the country.

At the Morris home in Hendersonville, Tenn., photos of their children line the hallway. Here's a picture of them with Oliver North. There's one with former Vice President Dan Quayle. Over here is one with Bill Frist.

Tom Landry, Willard Scott, Norman Schwarzkopf. The list goes on.

Still, that regret lingered.

At 72, Bob Morris — better known to his friends and business associates as “Tall Man” — plays tennis three days a week. He has four grandchildren, with one more on the way.

Though retired from a successful career in sales and public relations, Morris still works part-time. He is also a cancer survivor, and

doctors tell him it is now in remission.

But for the last 50 years, despite all that's right with his life, Morris has lived with the ever-present reality that he didn't finish what he started. After attending Union University for four years, he left the school in 1955 two hours short of graduating. A failed economics course was his undoing.

“I guess I got overextended with a beautiful redheaded lady,” Morris offered as his reason for not passing the class. “I just wasn't as focused, maybe, as I should have been.”

“Don't blame that on me,” Sylvia replied. “He didn't study.”

Whatever the reasons, that two-hour course hovered between Morris and a college degree for five decades.

“Not a full week has passed in 50 years that I didn't think about it,” he said. “Why? Why?”

Every time he filled out a job application, it reminded him of his shortcoming. How much college have you had? Four years, he

continued>

would answer.
Degree?
No.

"I didn't even want to fill out an application, because four years and you didn't graduate?" Morris said. "It didn't keep me from getting a job or getting whatever I wanted, but still, it affected me mentally."

Not anymore. Union University officials arranged for Morris to take that missing economics class on an independent study basis during the spring 2005 semester and fulfill his degree requirements. On May 21, as a member of the class of 2005, Morris walked across the platform and clutched his degree. He may never let go.

"I get cold chills just thinking about it," Morris said.

A native of Springfield, Tenn., Morris

The young couple started dating, and they were married in 1956. Morris borrowed money from Sylvia's dad to buy her ring.

But in the meantime, during his last semester of college, Morris had secured a job back home with the Springfield Woolen Mills as personnel director. At the time, that was more important to him than a college degree.

"It was a plum of a job," Morris said. "I wasn't going to go back and fool with two hours of economics with that job sitting on my plate."

So his degree went unfinished. But that didn't hinder Morris in his professional career.

After working for Springfield Woolen Mills briefly, Morris was drafted into the U.S. Army. He spent two years in Germany before returning home in 1958 and his previous position at the mills.

But the mills soon went out of business, and Morris needed a job. He discovered the

"To say that Bobby 'Tall Man' Morris is a loyal fan of Union University is putting it mildly," said Gary Williams, Union's associate vice president for university relations. "He and Sylvia attend alumni gatherings in the Nashville area, recruit students for the university and are great cheerleaders."

But even with all his professional accomplishments, Morris still was unhappy that he hadn't completed his degree.

"I never started anything I didn't finish," he said. "I just really want to cross the finish line. It became an obsession."

Late last year, Keith Absher, dean of the McAfee School of Business at Union, learned of Morris' situation from university registrar Jane Betts. They arranged to get Morris re-enrolled as a student and into an independent study marketing class to complete his degree requirements.



The Morris family enjoys an extensive collection of personal photos that tells their life story.

came from a poor family. College was never an option because he couldn't afford it.

"Scholarships in that era were few and far between," he said. "I had no intent on going to college. No intent whatsoever."

He excelled as an athlete in high school and managed to secure one of those rare scholarships from Coach Robert Jelks at Union to play basketball. Morris also played football and ran track during his collegiate career. Though he had never run track before, Morris never lost in the 400 meters. He set records that lasted for years.

When he wasn't competing, he lived in Adams Hall on the old Union campus and worked in the cafeteria three meals a day. He also took notice of Sylvia.

"I kept watching that young lady with red hair, and questioning who she was," he said.

Springfield Herald was looking for an editor. Although he had never taken a journalism course in his life, Morris convinced the publisher to hire him.

"He made a 'D' in English," Sylvia said. "I think that's funny."

His career path took Morris to NASCO Inc., a fundraising company in Springfield, where he worked in public relations before moving to sales. Morris became one of the company's top salesmen, which led to Reader's Digest hiring him for the company's Quality School Program.

Morris worked for Reader's Digest for 11 years before retiring, although he kept some of his major accounts and still works part-time.

Through it all, even without a degree, Morris and his wife have been huge supporters of Union University.

"He immediately completed all those requirements and did a superb job," Absher said.

For the class, Morris had to write a thesis on the history of the McAfee School of Business and how his time at Union had affected him over the last 50 years.

"He got up every morning at 5:00, and watched the squirrels and the redbirds and the bluebirds," Sylvia said. "And he wrote for four weeks at 5:00 in the morning."

His degree requirements now complete, Morris donned a black cap and gown and took his place with the rest of Union's graduating class of 2005. He said the achievement ranks only behind the day he became a Christian and the day he married the love of his life.

"Number three in life would be that," Morris said. "It would be difficult for anyone to be more thrilled than I am now." 