

For S. Euclid resident, 90, 'If you keep studying, you stay young'

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Cleveland State University awards Jean Elsner its Presidential Medal for taking more than 100 classes over the last 28 years

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For Jean Elsner, learning has been a lifelong pursuit. And in Elsner's case, that life reached 90 years on Dec. 4.

For the past 28 years, Elsner has eagerly taken part in Project 60, which allows people 60 and over to attend classes in public colleges and universities without receiving credits, at no cost.

As a result, her chosen school, Cleveland State University, bestowed upon Elsner the Presidential Medal Sunday, commemorating the fact the more than 100 classes she has taken at CSU are more than anyone else. It is also in appreciation for her constant desire to learn.

Since CSU's founding, less than 10 people have won the award.

The award was given during CSU's fall graduation ceremony. In attendance were more than 50 family members and friends, including her three sons, all of whom live out of state.

In addition to taking two or three classes per semester, Elsner works at getting to school by walking from her Stillmore Road home to Cedar Road, where she catches a bus downtown.

"I have to get to the bus stop early, by 7:10 every morning," she said. "I get to school by 8:10, but my first class isn't until 10. So, I spend the time every day doing the *New York Times* crossword puzzle."

Said Elsner's son, David, senior digital editor at the *Chicago Tribune*, "Every Sunday morning, we do the *New York Times* crossword puzzle together over the phone."

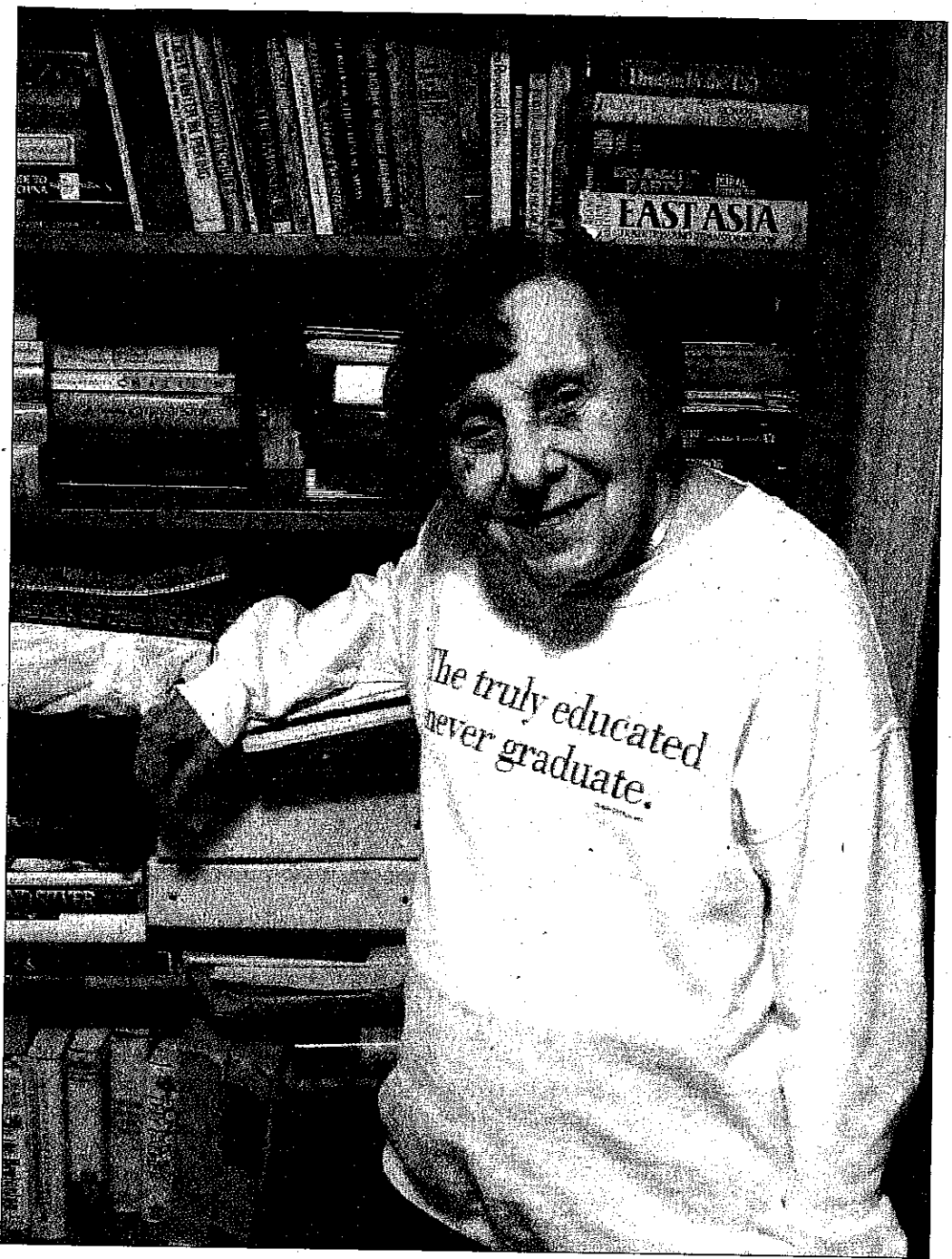
David Elsner calls his mother, "One of the smartest people I have ever known."

Her sons credit Elsner with reading to them, and teaching them to read at a pre-school age. She even taught David, 61, phonics before he went to school.

About a year ago, her sons attempted to pay back the life's path of learning their mother started them upon by contacting CSU about having Jean honored with an honorary degree. The school has issued about 150 of those, so receiving the Presidential Medal put their mother in an even more exclusive club.

A John Adams High School graduate, Elsner was raised off Kinsman Road in Cleveland by Russian-born parents.

"It was always, 'When you go to college,' not 'if,'" Jean Elsner said of her parents' words to her as she was raised.



JEFF PIORKOWSKI/SUN NEWS
Jean Elsner wears a sweatshirt proclaiming a belief by which she lives. Elsner's thirst for knowledge began as a youngster when she frequently read two books per day.

In 1937, she enrolled at Ohio University, graduating magna cum laude four years later with a bachelor of arts degree, and with an eye towards becoming a social worker.

In order to go to college, she helped pay expenses by babysitting at a pay rate of 25 cents per hour, and took out a loan, which she later paid back at \$10 per month.

Of her intended career, she said, "I decided I wouldn't make a good social worker. (During her senior year of college) I worked with unemployed miners in southern Ohio. They were so poor, I took it (feelings for them) home with me."

Elsner went on to serve in the WAC (women's army) and the Social Security Administration, as well as various office jobs. She was also a substitute teacher for a while in Cleveland Heights. She also went on to marry husband, Sidney, now deceased, who was a *Plain Dealer* editor for 41 years.

Throughout it all, she continually read.

"My father (Barnett Leaf) was a carpenter. He was the one who was very big on education.

"When I was in elementary school in the summers, I would go to the library every

day and get out two books, read them, take them back the next day and get two more."

She learned of Project 60 when she was 62 after having recently been let go from her last office job, during the recession of 1982.

Since that time, she has voraciously sought to learn, taking mostly classes involving history, sociology and anthropology. Elsner particularly enjoys 20th century history classes.

"I lived through a lot of that," she said. "I try not to be obstreperous. I let the (other students) answer the questions."

Still, she said, she is an active participant in classes and does make the occasional comment on how things were in the past, particularly when taking a class such as the history of Cleveland, post 1915.

Elsner said she likes to tell the story about the time in 1937 when her father, who already had a home go into foreclosure, had trouble getting a loan when he sought to later buy another house.

She decided to try and help by writing a letter to First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt. A short time later, her father got word from a lender that a loan was possible. Elsner received a letter from Roosevelt's assistant stating the First Lady did get her letter.

"I've had professors and students thank me for taking a class," Elsner said of her input. "Those are the nicest things to hear."

Some of those professors did not hesitate in writing letters on Elsner's behalf when they learned she was nominated by the school's board for the Presidential Medal

of Merit. "I've had professors and students thank me for taking a class," Elsner said of her input. "Those are the nicest things to hear."

She has been a role model for her sons, as well. In addition to David, son Michael, 55, teaches sociology and criminology at Northern Arizona University in Flagstaff, Ariz.

Larry Elsner, 58, is director of two schools that educate autistic children in Austin, Texas.

"We're proud of our mom that she's gone to school for 28 years, and that she still takes the bus there. She's very active," said Michael Elsner.

As for her friends, Jean Elsner said, "They think it's great what I do, but they won't do it."

Still in good health, Elsner plans to attend classes for as long as she can. She also continues to read daily, often without the aid of glasses.

Of her age, she said, "I know, 90 sounds old, but I don't feel old."

In fact, in stating what might be her life's philosophy, Elsner said, "If you keep studying, you stay young."