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## Frank Ganz finally earns his high school diploma at age 83

By Dana Hull  
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Frank Ganz dropped out of high school in the ninth grade.

That was more than six decades ago. Now he's finally getting his high school diploma — at the age of 83.

Members of his extended family — which includes four children, 12 grandchildren, five great-grandchildren and a soon-to-be-born great-great-grandchild — will gather for his June 17 graduation ceremony. A boisterous after-party is planned at Buca di Beppo, "Papa's" favorite restaurant.

"I always told my grandchildren 'Make sure you graduate high school,'" said Ganz, who ran an auto parts store in Los Gatos until his retirement. "But inside it always burned that I didn't finish. I was always embarrassed. When my grandchildren started going off to college, I made up my mind. I said 'I'm going to do it.' "

Video: Never too late



So Ganz, who dropped out of school to work during the Great Depression, walked into the offices of the Metropolitan Adult Education Program on Pearl Avenue in San Jose on Aug. 11, 2004. Here, adults — many in their 20s and 30s — earn a high school diploma through a self-paced independent study program; its Web site exhorts that "It's never too late!!" and "You're never too old!!"

"I kept saying 'Dad, just go get your GED,'" said Sharon Cavarrubias, Ganz's daughter, referring to the General Education Development high school equivalency exam and certificate. "But he was very clear that he didn't want a GED. He wanted to go to high school."

Ganz, one of the adult education program's oldest students ever, wanted to learn the subjects and get a real high school diploma, like his grandchildren

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have.

It took him almost five years to earn the 190 credits needed; for his studies, he often drew from his own life.

"History and writing essays is a piece of cake," Ganz said. "I grew up in the 1930s. I know all about the Great Depression and racism and all of that. I basically lived American history."

Algebra, however, proved tricky. For that, Ganz worked with Tom Heim, a volunteer tutor, for nearly two years. His final grade in Algebra II: an A.

"I will really miss him," said Heim, who met with Ganz two afternoons a week. "He has so many stories, and always has interesting tales to tell me."

Born in 1925 in New Jersey, Ganz was the youngest of five sons. By the time he was in middle school, America was in the throes of the Great Depression. At 13, he got a part-time job at a candy store, and started skipping school.

"I started eighth grade, but I was also working on the side," said Ganz, who also began hanging around his brother's auto repair garage. "I'd go to school for a day or two, and then not go. In those days they didn't really check up on you."

His transcript from Maplewood Junior High in New Jersey is littered with failing grades in English, science, mechanical drawing and typing.

"You see all these E's?" said Ganz, looking at grades from a faded transcript from the 1939-1940 school year. "That's because I didn't go to school."

At 16, Ganz decided to join the Navy. He was too young to enlist, so he changed his birth certificate.

"I changed the date, and it was a rainy day. I dropped my birth certificate in the water on the street and then stepped on it," said Ganz with a mischievous twinkle in his eye. "When I went into the recruiting office, I said, 'Oh my, I'm so sorry, it's smudged.' They passed me on through, and 90 days later I was on my way to Africa as a minelayer."

Ganz and his first wife, Angelina, moved to California in 1968; Ganz ran a successful store, Main Auto Parts in Los Gatos, until retiring in 1994. Angelina died in 1991; he met Laverne, his current wife, at the gym a few years ago. She is 81.

"People ask Laverne 'How long have you been together?' and she says 'Since high school,' " said Cavarrubias, who lives in Almaden Valley. "There were several afternoons where my girls would be doing homework at the kitchen table, and I'd be making dinner. Dad would come over and do his homework too."

The small staff at the adult education program celebrated Ganz's final day of algebra class with cookies and sparkling cider. Several wiped tears as he tried on his outlandishly bright purple graduation cap and gown.

"Can you believe this color? Oh my gosh," said Ganz, who then asked how to change the tassel. "Do we start with the left side or the right side?"

But graduation isn't the end. Though Ganz has a busy life that includes cruises and casinos, he might take other classes, and the adult education program is hoping to lure him back as an American history tutor.

"You have to get it in your mind that you're going to better yourself," Ganz said. "My grandchildren inspired me. Some of my granddaughters are really good at speaking Spanish. So I might take a Spanish

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