First RCC graduate remembers the early years

Rogue Community College opened its doors 40 years ago, and for Barbara Quigley Summey, one of the college’s first students to graduate, it happened at just the right time.

After graduating from Grants Pass High School in 1970, she spent her freshman year at what is now Southern Oregon University.

“Then I ran out of money and came home. But RCC had opened, and so that was perfect,” she recalled. “I’m really glad I did come to Rogue Community College. It was affordable, I got settled down, and it made the transition to Oregon State University easier.”

RCC, which started in Josephine County at a former Job Corps site, has since grown to a three-campus two-county district serving nearly 19,000 students. Many thousands of students have earned degrees or certificates at rogue and transferred to universities or learned jobs skills for new careers in the Rogue Valley and elsewhere.

The last four decades have shown Summey the impact RCC had on a region that – prior to 1970 – lacked accessible educational opportunities for so many.

“At that time I didn’t understand the value of RCC and what it meant to the community,” she said. “Now I do. After 35 years as an educator, I understand community colleges are a wonderful step. I’ve enjoyed watching RCC grow and expand over the years.”

The original Redwood Campus was muddy, parking lots and sidewalks were gravel rather than paved, and the buildings were nothing fancy, according to Summey. Because the campus lacked a science lab, students attended classes at Grants Pass High School in the evening.

“But I liked the instructors and the smaller classes,” Summey said. In particular, she recalls how Tenison Haley, RCC’s first dean of Student Services, surprised her when she was a student worker in the dean’s office.

“One day I came in and they handed me a gown,” she said. “I had no idea graduation was happening that day.” Along with one other student whose name has been lost to history, Summey became RCC’s first grad. Her mother, Linda Quigley, who still lives near Grants Pass, attended the ceremony along with a few other guests. “It was very small and personal,” Summey said.

After earning an associate’s degree at Rogue, Summey went on to graduate from Oregon State. She
taught elementary school for one year in Valsetz, a remote coastal mountain logging town, and then taught 34 years in Hillsboro. Recently retired, she's living in Forest Grove with husband Keith.

A self-described lifelong learner, Summey is taking technology classes at Portland Community College, studying quilting and sewing and volunteering with a local SMART program.

The last time she visited RCC was for the 20th anniversary in 1981, and she's planning to attend the commencement June 11 at the Marjorie Holzgang Concert Bowl.

“It will be nice to walk on the campus again and see how much it all has changed,” she said.

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