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Georgia Southern alumna fulfills lifelong dream, helps children struggling to read

May 27, 2020



Life has a way of bringing people back to where they belong. At least that's what 66-year-old lifelong learner Robin Perry ('93, '16) believes.

When her children were young, Perry attended Armstrong State University and earned a bachelor's degree in English with the goal of becoming a high school teacher. However, she worked part time in cellular sales while completing her degree and continued on that path to own and operate five cellular stores in the Chatham County area.

It wasn't until her children were grown that Perry decided to revisit her dreams. She began teaching as a substitute teacher to gain experience and realized her passion for special education.

"I love my students, and I want to do everything I can to help them read fluently," said Perry.

Perry went on to earn a Master of Arts in Teaching in Special Education ('16) from Georgia Southern University and worked in the Savannah-Chatham County Public School System for five years before transitioning to a third grade inclusion (special and general education) classroom setting at Liberty Elementary School in Midway, Georgia.

During that time, she noted a gap in reading education and began working toward a way to alleviate it.

"In the last few years of teaching, it seems that students are missing early phonics instruction," said Perry. "I taught siblings who were a year apart in school but had the same coping strategy for their reading deficits, which was odd. It sparked my idea to start researching reading remediation."

The goal of her research is to find mechanisms focusing on phonics remediation while having students maintain their third grade class work.

"Students who are struggling to sound out words are not grasping the context or meaning of what they are reading," said Perry. "They are so busy focusing on letter sounds that they lose understanding of the passage. Research shows that if students reach the third grade level without reading proficiency, they will always struggle. I want to help intervene for these students because reading deficits will affect every subject they attempt to learn."

Perry started a three-part comprehensive reading program to assist students. Working in small groups of three or less students, she focuses on remediation of letter sounds, followed by sight card practice, and finally, the group reads the same ability-leveled passage every day.

"By having the students read something fun and expressive together repeatedly, they become confident and excited to participate," said Perry. "In some ways, this replicates that at-home reading experience that helps developing young readers learn to love reading."

Since moving to distance learning in the wake of COVID-19, Perry refuses to lose progress with her students and continues to emphasize reading with them by hosting virtual meetings so they can converse with each other and the teachers. They also utilize online platforms such as FlipGrid, Epic and Read Works. For those who don't have access to the materials, Perry mails or delivers paper packets to their homes.

"We are really trying to provide a no-pressure learning scenario for students, but I don't want to lose the progress that we have made," she said. "That is another reason I have decided to host a summer program to keep working with my students who need to continue reading skills."

Perry will complete an Ed.S. in Special Education this summer.

"Well, for one, college is free because I'm over the age of 62," she said with a laugh. "But also, I'll never stop researching until the day I die. I love it. I do professional learning every day to try to learn more about how I can help these students and better serve them."

Georgia Southern University, a public Carnegie Doctoral/R2 institution founded in 1906, offers 141 degree programs serving more than 26,000 students through nine colleges on three campuses in Statesboro, Savannah, Hinesville and online instruction. A leader in higher education in southeast Georgia, the University provides a diverse student population with expert faculty, world-class scholarship and hands-on learning opportunities. Georgia Southern creates lifelong learners who serve as responsible scholars, leaders and stewards in their communities. Visit [GeorgiaSouthern.edu](https://www.GeorgiaSouthern.edu).

[Personal hardships drive graduate to earn degree, advocate for others](#)

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As a wife to a U.S. Army soldier and mother to a young child, conditions for completing a college degree weren't optimal, yet the drive to teach children pushed Mary Hayworth toward the finish line.

"I want to instill a love of reading and writing for students," said Hayworth. "Everything is cemented in reading and writing."

Following a move from Oregon with her husband's new military assignment in Savannah, Georgia, Hayworth and her family found themselves 3,000 miles from anything familiar in 2016. Situated a year later, Hayworth's passion for education drove her to finish a degree she began years earlier but never finished.

On Georgia Southern University's Armstrong Campus she pursued a bachelor's degree in secondary education with a concentration in English. In three years, Hayworth completed her work in the program while

navigating her husband's 9-month, overseas deployment and taking on the role as sole parent to their school-age son.

The accomplishment didn't come without significant hurdles.

"My husband had been deployed previously, but I was able to stay with my parents during that time," said Hayworth. "This time, I didn't really know anyone in Savannah and my classmates were all 20 and 21 years old."

During that same time, Hayworth also had to manage specialized care for their son, who broke his femur and was in a hip spica cast that immobilized both legs.

However, Hayworth remained optimistic, using her own personal experiences as motivation.

"I was bullied in high school, and that has only fueled my desire to work with students to alleviate that pressure and hardship they experience in schools," she said. "It is important to teach content and teach it well, but it's also about building relationships with the students you are working with."

Hayworth wants to be an advocate for her future students.

"Looking back at my experiences, I was not afforded the basic opportunity of having teachers and administration believe me," she said. "The issues I dealt with will not happen to my students because they will have me."

Hayworth noted that her professors were instrumental in helping her reach graduation day, particularly College of Education's Regina Rahimi, Ed.D., and College of Arts and Humanities' Jane Rago, Ph.D.

"Dr. Rahimi is so smart and inspiring," said Hayworth. "She cares about the well-being of others and you can feel that when she teaches. She makes me want to be a better person and teacher."

Rago challenged her, she said, to forge new analytical skills.

"I will never hear a song or read a passage the same way," said Hayworth. "She instilled a new sense of critical thinking that I will never forget."

Hayworth has lined up a job in the fall to begin work at a high school in Muscogee County, Georgia, where her husband is currently stationed as a drill sergeant. Her hope is to earn experience in the classroom and then pursue an online graduate degree in education from Georgia Southern.

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