

For Sheridan Vernon, learning

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never gets old

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WILLIMANTIC — Local businessman Sheridan Vernon could, very well, relate to Rodney Dangerfield — or, at the very least, Dangerfield's "Thornton Melon" character in the 1980s cult hit "Back to School."

That's because the 63-year-old is a frequent attendee of Eastern Connecticut State University classes, rubbing elbows with fellow students possibly old enough to call him "grandpa."

And while Dangerfield's catchphrases implied he never got any respect, Vernon said he gets respect from professors, who urge him to further his education by taking other classes.

In fact, Eastern's "Thornton Melon" is encouraging other "seasoned seniors" — he doesn't use the term senior citizens — to take classes at ECSU.

"The kids are glad to have you in class," he said, adding in the five classes he's taken, he's had "nothing but positive interactions."

Vernon said he's taken three classes for credit and two for audit, which means he attends lectures, but doesn't take tests or write papers.

"I sit right in the front row," he said, adding it's been a "wonderful experience" interacting with students who might be 45 years his junior.

Vernon indicated he pays just \$40 per semester in miscellaneous fees to attend school, and anyone in the state over the age of 62 can attend any state school — such as ECSU — for \$40, depending on space availability in classes.

The little-known benefit to seniors, according to ECSU spokesman Edward Osborn, "falls under Public Act 74-282, which states that the tuition and state university fee shall be waived for any person 62 years of age or older, provided space exists in the course."

Vernon began taking classes in summer 2010, after he turned 62, going back to school after graduating from Western Michigan University in 1971 with a bachelor's degree in general business with an accounting minor.

Classes he's taken include introduction to renewable energy, two



Roxanne Pandolfi

Sheridan Vernon, 63, watches a video on the screen during an environmental science class at Eastern Connecticut State University recently.

classes on sustainable energy, introduction to acting and introductory Spanish.

Vernon doesn't just take classes though, he also collected an award at an energy conservation expo for a water conservation system his group designed.

While there, he takes advantage of the university's amenities, as he works out at the gym, goes on school-sponsored trips and plays racquetball.

He said, sometimes, he'll play against two players, since he plays

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pretty well.

When he isn't at school, he does taxes — Sheridan Vernon E.A. LLC — which is located on Main Street in Willimantic.

The firm does federal tax return service, income tax return services, tax return customer service, tax return service and tax return preparation services, according to an online listing.

Vernon added his professors have told him they were glad he had taken their classes and his acting professor told him to take an improvisation class.

He said he'd like to see other "seasoned seniors" take classes

and that his father, Sidney Vernon, took classes from age 62 to 86 at ECSU.

Vernon said he thinks that, even-

tually, he'll get a second bachelor's degree, likely in general studies.

"I'm there primarily in a quest for knowledge," he added.