Distributed by UW News Service, February 16, 2026

Links to story: <https://news.uwgb.edu/featured/01/25/learning-has-no-age-limit-non-traditional-students-reframe-whats-possible-at-uw-green-bay/>

**Learning Has No Age Limit: Non‑Traditional Students Reframe What’s Possible at UW–Green Bay**

Written by Michael Shaw, UW-Green Bay

Students filter in on the first day of [Spanish 201](https://www.uwgb.edu/spanish/), settling in with shuffling notebooks and quick greetings. It’s a mid-sized class of about 20 students and is typical of the intermediate sequence: mostly first- and second-year undergraduates easing into the semester.

When UW-Green Bay Professor Cristina Ortiz arrived and greeted the room in Spanish, two students in particular stood out — not because they called attention to themselves, but because they were noticeably older than everyone around them.

**A Different Kind of First Day**

Cynthia Norton, recently retired and new to studying a foreign language, sat near the front. Looking around at “basically kids,” she wondered if she would even be accepted. When the class began, the Spanish came fast. “Oh my God, I’m never gonna make it,” she recalled. Speaking up was the hardest part — she didn’t like talking in front of people — but she stayed with it, determined to learn.

A few seats away sat Ahmet Dervish, a retired anesthesiologist auditing the course. Surrounded by students decades younger, he noticed Norton and felt a bit of relief — he wasn’t the only older one there. “I never felt the youngsters had any attitude toward me,” he said. “They were very friendly.” He joked that he probably studied more than the students getting the credit. “I’m a very timid person. I am shy,” he said, but learning Spanish made that feel less important.

***“I just wanted to keep learning.”—UW-Green Bay student Cynthia Norton***

Ortiz paired students for an early-semester exercise, and Norton and Dervish ended up side-by-side. Working together felt easy from the start. “He was kind and sweet and intelligent,” Norton said. “If I didn’t understand something, he would explain what I missed.” Dervish remembers the moment too — and the small Spanish-English dictionary Norton gave him after class. “We worked well together,” he said. “Cynthia was always prepared, always trying. If I could help explain something, I was happy to do it.”

**Passion Meets Purpose**

More adults well past their first college-degree phase are returning to school to learn — not necessarily to earn another credential, but to follow a passion they’ve had for years. At UW–Green Bay, enrollment of adult and returning learners has remained steady in recent years, showing up in places like undergraduate classrooms, certificate programs and the [Lifelong Learning Institute](https://www.uwgb.edu/lifelong-learning-institute/). In the fall of 2025, 29.4% of UW-Green Bay students were over the age of 21. The university’s flexible degree pathways and community connections give students like Norton and Dervish more ways to participate fully in learning.

For Norton, coming back to college after retirement wasn’t about starting over. It was about finally giving time to the things she had always wanted to learn. She had spent decades working in administrative and education roles, often helping others move through their own academic paths. When she retired, she realized she wanted an academic path of her own.

“I’ve always loved school,” she said. “I was the kid who read cereal boxes. Anything with words on it.”

Spanish felt both unfamiliar and motivating — something she could build from the ground up. Her return to school also helped her stay connected and mentally active.

Dervish’s path back to the classroom looked different but led him to the same place. Before retiring, he spent his career as an anesthesiologist – trained first in Cyprus and later in the United States – with a professional life built on science, precision and care.

He never had the chance to take general-education courses or explore the humanities in an American university. When his wife enrolled in a class at UW–Green Bay and brought home textbooks, something clicked.

“I said, wow,” he recalled. “We never did anything like this.”

Spanish became his entry point. He approached the language with the same focus he brought to medicine.

***“Older students bring a different kind of purpose. They show younger students what it looks like to learn because you want to.”-UW-Green Bay Spanish Prof. Cristina Ortiz***

As Norton and Dervish advanced, each found a reason to take Spanish far beyond Room 212. Their paths diverged geographically — hers to the Mediterranean coast, his to the pilgrimage trails of northern Spain — but both discovered immersion that reshaped their confidence.

**The World Becomes the Classroom**

For Norton, who had never left the United States before, a UW-Green Bay study-abroad opportunity opened a door she hadn’t known was possible. She joined a group of mostly 19- and 20-year-olds headed to Madrid and Alicante, bunking with college students who quickly stopped noticing the age difference. “One of the girls said, ‘I forgot you’re not one of us,’” Norton recalled — a comment she still considers one of the best she received. On hikes, younger students slowed down and stayed with her if she fell behind. “I did feel part of the team,” she said. “A part of all of it.”

Dervish followed a different route across Spain — literally. After several semesters of Spanish, he walked the Camino de Santiago, a centuries-old pilgrimage ending at the shrine of Saint James in Santiago de Compostela. He covered hundreds of miles and stayed in pilgrim hostels (called albergues) along the way.

His travels eventually led him to become a hospitalero — one of the volunteers who manage the hostels where pilgrims rest each night. The role required Spanish daily as he helped people from around the world, listened to their stories and kept the albergues running. “You walk with people from Italy, England — every nation you can think of. You intermingle with all these people,” he said.

***“You walk with people from Italy, England — every nation you can think of.”UW-Green Bay student, Dr. Ahmet Dervish***

Even back in Wisconsin, that sense of purpose continued. Dervish volunteers in bilingual classrooms and community programs supporting Spanish-speaking families. “More than 50% of the people who come there speak Spanish,” he said.

Norton is already thinking about where her Spanish may take her next — to Spain again, or to other Spanish-speaking places she has yet to see. She plans to continue tutoring and staying engaged in the language.

And sometimes, small reminders appear in everyday life—like the dictionary she gave Dervish that first semester. Proof that learning at any age can open more than just a book.