Persistence pays off for Keiser graduates

College is optional.

Quitting school, however, was not an option for Rachel Warmuth. The 32-year-old started college out of state, but withdrew to care for her husband as he battled brain cancer. With two toddlers at home and no income, his death left the family in shambles. "I lost everything financially," said Warmuth, of Cape Coral. "I lost my home, my car, my money — everything."

But she didn't lose her drive to succeed in the classroom, and on Friday she joined 139 others in graduating from Keiser University.

Nancy Tedros, president of Keiser's Fort Myers campus, said Warmuth's story of struggle isn't unique. This year's graduates include single parents, immigrants, first-generation college students and those who dealt with financial, health and academic issues. On Friday night at Harborside Event Center, they shared a common title of college graduate.

"Those who make it are those who persist," Tedros said. "They don't let obstacles stop them. They just get up the next day and do it again."

Jesse Vellos may be the king of starting and stopping. The Naples resident quit high school three different times.

"I didn't try, and I didn't care," he said.

But Vellos kept going back, ultimately earning a high school diploma. He then moved to Gainesville, but admittedly partied too much. He enrolled in college there, then withdrew after deciding to join the military.

"When I came out, I was a different person," said Vellos, 31.

With a new focus and career goals, Vellos used his veteran benefits to enroll at Keiser. This time, he tried. And much to his surprise, Vellos earned the title of valedictorian for his graduating class.
"Everything I own is because I worked for it," the proud graduate said before delivering his speech.

Carlos Londono, 28, admits his family had a good life in Colombia, but difficult circumstances there forced a quick exit. "We pretty much had to disappear from the country," he said.

Londono's mother never completed her formal education, but he was determined to get a degree. He took classes at Edison College and ITT Tech, but felt neither campus was the right setting. A little Internet research clarified his options after he read negative comments from students at other institutions in Southwest Florida.

"Everybody was complaining about something, except at Keiser," the Cape Coral resident said.

Commencement speaker Sen. Garrett Richter, R–Naples, commended graduates for their stick-to-itiveness and ability to juggle multiple balls at the same time. That, in essence, defines the prototypical Keiser student.

"You keep plugging along and don't let one day get away from you," Warmuth said.

**Keiser University**
- Location: Fort Myers
- Campus president: Nancy Tedros
- Graduates: 140
- Valedictorian: Jesse Vellos
- Website: keiseruniversity.edu