

At 96, he now has his diploma

Raymond Schaefer dropped out of school to support his family, then fought in World War II

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WATERFORD — Nearly 80 years after dropping out of high school and fighting in World War II, Raymond Schaefer is now in a class by himself.

The U.S. Army veteran finally got his diploma Thursday in a ceremony at Waterford High School that was steeped in affection and respect for the 96-year-old graduate.

After friends approached Waterford school officials about recognizing Schaefer, the school district orchestrated a surprise graduation ceremony, complete with a marching band and a traditional cap and gown.

Thinking that he was just helping a friend run an errand at the high school, Schaefer arrived to find the school's atrium decorated in balloons and filled with supporters for his graduation day.

Wearing his cap and gown and surrounded by well-wishers later, Schaefer said he felt a gratifying sense of accomplishment at finally getting his high school diploma.

"I waited a long time for it, never got around to it," he said. "It's great, great, very important."

Friends and supporters wiped away tears as they watched the unusual ceremony, joined by



Raymond Schaefer holds his high school diploma Thursday after a special graduation ceremony at Waterford High School for the World War II veteran who had dropped out to fight in the war.

school staff and even some current students for the noontime event.

Mary Koch, a longtime friend, said she was overcome with emotion, knowing that earning a diploma was so important to Schaefer.

"I'm honored to be here," Koch said. "It just means the world to me. I think so much of him."

Schaefer was a teenager living near Wind Lake in the 1940s when he dropped out of school during

his sophomore year at the Racine County School of Agriculture. The school has long since closed, but it was located near Rochester in a spot that is now part of the Waterford High district.

After leaving school to help support his family, Schaefer was soon drafted into the U.S. Army. He fought as an infantryman during World War II, which ended in 1945.

After the war, Schaefer worked for 30 years in the accounting de-

partment of Unit Crane & Shovel Corp. His wife, Marie, died about 10 years ago. They had no children.

Now living in Milwaukee County, Schaefer frequently talked about his regrets over dropping out of high school, and how he wished he had earned a diploma.

Cynthia Bennett, a longtime family friend, saw a TV news report about an elderly person receiving an honorary diploma from a school in Iowa. So she decided to approach Waterford school officials about Schaefer.

"I would love to see him get a diploma so he feels his life was totally successful," she wrote to the school district.

On Thursday, Bennett had a visit with Schaefer, and she told him that she needed to pick something up from Waterford High School. She walked him into the school for what she knew would be his graduation surprise.

"It's just wonderful," Bennett said. "It's just over the top."

The high school marching band greeted Schaefer with a musical performance as he entered the building. He was then escorted to a seat surrounded by decorations and spectators.