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Hugoton's Warren Spikes is surprised with the gift of a degree at his 90th birthday party on Dec. 4. Spikes' son, Kirk, obtained records from Rutgers University and the University of Kansas, and after talking with officials at KU, he found his father had enough credits to qualify for a degree in petroleum engineering, which he received in a ceremony this weekend.

By ROBERT PIERCE

- Leader & Times

When the University of Kansas School of Engineering passed out 66 bachelor's degrees Saturday, a 67th degree was recognized for a special and grateful 90-year-old man from Hugoton.

Finally, his degree

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Warren Spikes enrolled at KU in 1942 and worked toward a degree in petroleum engineering until the U.S. Army drafted him in 1945, just a few credits shy of earning his diploma.

The Army then sent Spikes to Rutgers University in New Brunswick, N.J., for six months to study civil engineering. Despite the extra education, Spikes never transferred the college credits back to KU.

Earlier this fall, Warren's son, Kirk Spikes, researched his father's case for receiving a degree from KU, all the while keeping his efforts a secret from his dad.



Kirk obtained his father's records from Rutgers and asked KU to review all the information to see whether he'd completed the requirements to earn a degree.

Officials in KU's registrar's office and engineering dean's office reviewed the transcripts and determined Warren is eligible for a degree based on the KU curriculum in 1945.

Warren turned 90 on Dec. 4, and as a birthday surprise, his family and friends gave him the news that he's now an official KU graduate at a party over the Thanksgiving holiday in his hometown of Hugoton.

Warren was scheduled to formally be awarded his degree Saturday as part of KU's fall

recognition ceremony for the college's school of engineering grads, and Kirk said he got the idea to begin helping his father get a degree from listening to stories his dad told about his time in the 1940s.

"He told us that he'd gone to school and that he was drafted when he was going to school at KU," he said. "The Army sent him back to Rutgers to do more school. He just always told us several times as we were growing up."

Kirk said Warren told him he had enough credits for a degree, but he did not have the actual diploma itself. The son said he and his wife were visiting about putting together a biography and some history on Warren as part of the surprise.

"My wife and Warren kind of worked together on putting a little biography together for Warren's grandkids," Kirk said. "In that, they put a composition that my daughter had written about her granddad when she was a freshman in high school."

Warren's story about how he didn't transfer the credits from Rutgers to KU eventually came out in his granddaughter's paper.

"He told her the story, and that came out in this composition which we saved," Kirk said. "I read that, and I thought we've heard this for many, many years. Maybe, it's time we see if we can get him a degree."

Kirk said everyone involved in the process of gathering the information needed to transfer the credits was "very cooperative."

"I started out by calling Rutgers first because those were the hours we needed to get to Kansas University so they could put them together," he said. "I thought that would be the first step, and within a few days, I received them by mail, even official transcripts. That wasn't too difficult."

Kirk's next step was to go to KU to begin the process of transferring the credits from Rutgers to the Lawrence school.

"I said 'Where do I start?' when I talked to the registrar's office," he said. "They looked up his unofficial records, got it out of archives and sent it to me. I looked everything over, and it looked like it was probably a doable deal."

Kirk next contacted the KU School of Engineering, explaining the information to a lady in the department.

"It looked like once she received the Rutgers information that I had and she received the official transcripts out of the KU archives, she was able to put it together," he said. "She had a couple meetings and called me about a week before his birthday celebration and told me that he was going to have a diploma the next week."

Kirk said after leaving Rutgers, his father never really found the time to put together the paperwork to transfer the credits.

"He ended up going to the Pacific Theater after he got out of Rutgers," he said. "He served in Japan for a year in the occupation of Japan after the war was over."

After the war, Warren came back to Southwest Kansas to farm land his dad owned in Stevens County.

"He just never did connect the dots and get it all done," Kirk said of getting the credits transferred. "I think in his mind, he'd earned it. He just didn't have the piece of paper. Now, he's got the piece of paper."

Though he wasn't completely sure, Kirk said he is certain his father had felt some disappointment over the years concerning the matter.

“I imagine there was a little bit of mixed emotions, but what he’s indicated, he tried to join the Naval aviation forces at age 17 about the time he got out of high school,” Kirk said. “His dad wouldn’t sign those papers for being underage. He went on to junior college, then on up to KU and just kept going to school thinking he could be drafted anytime. He tried to get into the Naval aviation again while he was up there. They wouldn’t accept again, I think, mainly because he had hay fever.”

Drafted during his final semester at KU and nearing graduation, Warren, at the time, Kirk said, simply felt a need to serve his country in some capacity.

“I think he was just fortunate the Army, at some point in basic training, decided to send him back to Rutgers to do more school,” Kirk said. “He was just very fortunate in that respect.”

Warren said when he first heard the news, he thought his friends and family were playing a joke.

“I was really surprised,” he said. “I had no idea this was coming, but it’s certainly an honor.”

Being a 90-year-old graduate of a school of engineering, Kirk said, is something both he and Warren joke about a lot.

“We kid him about it that he’s in hot demand,” Kirk said. “He could probably do somebody some good.”

The degree awarded to Warren strengthens the family’s ties to KU, now spanning three generations of graduates.

“My mom and dad would be KU grads,” Kirk said. “My younger sister is a KU grad. My wife and

I are Fort Hays State grads. All three of my children are KU grads and went on to post-graduate degrees at KU.”

Overall, Kirk said the degree is rewarding to both he and his father.

“It’s been a very fulfilling thing to put together,” he said.

In addition to pursuing his degree, Warren loved to play basketball. He starred on his high school team and at Garden City Junior College, and when he arrived at KU, he drew the attention of the basketball coaching staff.

“We were playing intramurals in Robinson Gym, and I was playing pretty well,” Warren said. “I was a good passer. I heard that somebody went and asked Phog Allen to come and take a look. I was told he watched for a couple of minutes and decided I wasn’t tall enough or fast enough, so that was that.”

Warren, though, said he still loves basketball and watches KU every chance he gets.

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