Most adults likely would not think of returning to college after they have become grandparents. However, 54-year-old Bennie (Ben) Thompson has big aspirations for his growing family. Grandfather of three, Thompson is an Honors Transfer Fellow at MTSU, and a Navy Veteran. He is pursuing a bachelor’s degree in Concrete Industry Management (CIM). He joined the Navy Reserve in 1989, serving as a Corpsman during the Persian Gulf War and was deployed as part of Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm from November 1990 to May 1991.

During his time in the Navy, he earned an associate degree in electronics and spent the next 27 years working as a technician in telecommunication engineering, developing high-speed digital equipment for phone and cable companies. His time in this career field involved high voltage testing of equipment which, on occasion, saw him putting out literal fires.

“Bennie has a wide array of academic interests and could have easily pursued several different thesis topics, but he is focusing on improving the sustainability and environmental impact of using concrete,” said Judy Albakry, an honors academic advisor at MTSU. “We especially enjoy working with our non-traditional transfer students. These students show high levels of commitment to their plans to graduate from college because they have seen the value of a college degree and how it can impact their lives.”

Due to tariff impact and downsizing stemming from the pandemic, Thompson was let go from his job. Thanks to his VA benefits, Thompson was able to return to school. He transferred to MTSU after earning his second associate degree from Nashville State Community College. When most would be looking to retire, he was instead focused on his family and what is important for his future endeavors.

“I like to build things and see raw materials come to life as a useful product and, with that, would like to start my own business someday,” said Thompson.

A resident of Fayetteville, Thompson spoke passionately about his plans for his 13-acre property, including modifications to wet weather streams and waterfalls on hilly land, multiple tiny homes for his family to enjoy, and even a ridable, fully operational train track to make it easier, and way more fun, to navigate the slopes. A little dreamy he admits, but “so was the United States!” he declared.

Thompson’s continued education will help him achieve his dreams. He said he learned about opportunities with the Honors College while at Nashville State preparing for transfer to MTSU. The Honors Transfer Fellowship provides financial and institutional support for transfer students to complete their bachelor’s degrees and helps prepare them for post graduate academic research.

Originally a Construction Management major, a conversation he had with Kelly Strong encouraged
him to pursue Concrete Industry Management instead. Strong is the director of, and a professor for, the School of Concrete and Construction Management (SCCM) at MTSU.

Strong presents various industry opportunities as part of the Introduction to the Concrete and Construction Industry course. During the course, alumni speak to current students about their experiences and successes within the industry.

"Even though it is a smaller niche in the overall construction industry, the way our Concrete Industry Management curriculum is structured provides more career pathways for students than Construction Management," said Strong. "I think Bennie was excited about that aspect of the program."

"I like the challenge and look forward to the future," Thompson said. "The Concrete and Honors faculty and advisors have been very supportive. They have heard my vision and are putting me in places to help me achieve my goals."

There is no age limit for learning. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, more than 500,000 adults over age 50 were enrolled in postsecondary institutions in the fall of 2021, making up almost four percent of students.

Some may feel that his age might make him feel out of place among his young adult peers, but Thompson says he has acclimated well and feels accepted by his fellow students.

"They're purposely inclusive and very energetic and invite me to a wide array of functions and, he admits, "is a good and needed thing!"

He credits his military service in preparing him for college and said the level of camaraderie within the Honors and SCCM College is a lot like the military in bringing many talents to a central mission and purpose.

One honors student, Priscilla Hammermeister, with whom he works out with occasionally, invited him to a Spartan challenge, a grueling 21K obstacle race in Atlanta in March. Together, they turned the opportunity into a recruiting event to promote the CIM platform.

"We wanted to recruit those who might be undecided about their majors to the programs," he stated. "Once they get into the programs, they will find that there are a lot of opportunities and increased networking connections, especially for women and traditionally underrepresented groups in the trades. I am glad to be part of something where people are willing to come together to promote a good idea."

"When I enrolled, I thought I was going to have to travel back and forth every day and thought I would have to situate my course load around as many online classes as possible but thanks to my friend and founder of Granite Services, Roger Griffin, in keeping with this theme of teamwork, I have a place in Murfreesboro to stay during the week," said Thompson. "Everyone has been really good to help me make it all happen and for that I am grateful."

As homework assignment deadlines approach, he jokily admits that weekends are now a little more chaotic back at home, but he looks forward to the continued growth after graduation. Thompson also credits support from the Charlie and Hazel Daniels Veterans and Military Family Center on campus, as well as the Student Veterans of America MTSU Chapter, which is also known as the Blue Raider American Veteran Organization, or simply BRAVO. He was recently elected as the Vice President of Programs and Member Development for the BRAVO Chapler.

He said he is also grateful for the networking opportunities and friendships he has developed during his time at MTSU via CIM. After attending World of Concrete Exhibition in Vegas in January, he was inspired by the lineup of companies in the concrete space and met several leaders who invited him to learn more of what they do.

One such leader was Customer Service Manager and Sales Representative with Zimmerman Industries Phil Strogen, who is also a former Navy Senior Chief. Strogen inspired Thompson with a special gift, a “Chief’s Mess” medallion, encouraging him to a continued relationship and business opportunity in volumetric concrete delivery through Zimmerman Industries.

Returning to college has not always been an easy road for Thompson, who suffers from PTSD. During a particularly stressful project, he recalled English Professor Dr. Martha Hixon, who taught his Honor’s Research Seminar, telling students that “this is college, but this is also life,” and “that college doesn’t supersede life.” He said she emphasized available resources and the importance of reaching out if you need help with anything.

During that class, he experienced several potentially life altering events, including his son’s illness. He wasn’t initially able to complete two of his classes. These struggles threatened his collegiate aspirations but he was glad that he was able to be proactive and find out more >>
what options existed for him so he could focus on his son’s wellness. Fortunately, with a little extra effort, he will be able to complete those two classes and continue his educational journey.

“It was good to hear her very genuine level of concern, especially before my needing that kind of support,” Thompson said. “I was able to step back and deal with my family issues, and I am enthusiastic that I will get to finish those classes.”

Thompson is glad to be part of MTSU’s Concrete Industry Management program and the Honors College, stating “Due to the pandemic and the retiring age demographic, there are a lot of openings in the industry.”

MTSU CIM Director John Huddleston added, “Across the country and in most industries, we are seeing what’s called a “silver tsunami.” This term refers to a large portion of our workforce that is above the age of 60 and are therefore exiting the workforce to enjoy retirement.

“Worldwide, concrete is the number one most used building material and the number two most used material next to water. Uses of and technology related to concrete are rapidly expanding and the next rising tech-savvy generation has the potential to greatly expand and build on what has already been developed,” explained Huddleston. “Traditionally, in the concrete industry, employees spent decades rising through the ranks and in many cases without a college degree. There is tremendous need for educated individuals in the areas of concrete material science and business management. Our graduates can step straight into management roles and lead the next generation of concrete professionals.”

CCM offers two Bachelor of Science degrees, one in Construction Management and one in Concrete Industry Management. Both programs merge hands-on learning with innovative technology and business management skills.

The Honors College fosters a nurturing academic environment in small class settings. Honors Transfer Fellows receive additional financial aid each semester. Additionally, the College offers numerous scholarships and features several study-abroad opportunities.

Whether you are looking for a career change, achieving a life-long goal, or creating a new challenge, it is never too late to start, continue, or finish your education. Explore the opportunities available through the Honors College at MTSU.