Angagh MacKellar is surrounded by, from left, Patty Stephenson, Marc Stephenson and retired Jenk Stephenson. They are a teaching legacy at Saugus High School.

John Lazar
Staff Photographer

Students get a genealogy lesson from this spirited clan

How's this for a tight teaching family? Marc Stephenson is a young, fourth-year science teacher at Saugus High. His mom, Patty, has taught French at the school for 20 years. His dad, Jenk, taught English there for 30 years before retiring last year.

So who else from the family do you think decided to join the faculty this year?

Yeah, Grandma.

At the tender age of 89, the matriarch of this teaching family, Angagh MacKellar, decided it was time to dust off her pencil box and make a comeback.

"I took 30 summers off, that was enough," she said Friday, bidding her French students goodbye for the summer and asking if there was anything else she could do for them.

Yes, said one young man, raising his hand. She could come back and teach them again next year.

Maybe, Angagh MacKellar said,

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thanking them. Maybe.

Her mother's first name means Independence in Armenian, and boy, does it fit, Patty Stephenson says.

"Mom was born in Turkey in 1918 when Armenia was gaining its independence. My grandfather was so excited he named her Independence.

"It was perfect. She went to college at a time when old country daughters just didn't go to college. It helped that my grandfather had no boys."

When Patty told her mother over dinner one night last year that her workload at school was becoming unmanageable and the school couldn't find another French teacher to help, Angagh asked her daughter if there was anything she could do.

As a matter of fact, there was, Patty said. Get back in the classroom a couple of days a week and help her.

When Angagh retired in 1978 from Los Angeles Baptist High School in North Hills, it was Patty who took her job as a French teacher.

Now, 30 years later, she needed her mom to sub for her, help Patty teach the advanced French classes so she could spend more time with the newer French students.

"I told her I'd do all the lesson plans and grade the papers, all she had to do was teach. She was a great teacher once, and she still is.

"She wants the kids to speak up and say it right. She's tough, but they all love her."

When Angagh was diagnosed with lung cancer in April, and was lying in a hospital bed, the first get-well card she got was from her French students telling her they needed her back in the classroom.

"She was under oxygen, struggling to breathe, when she read it," Patty said. "You could just see her spirits rise and she got that old look in her eyes."

A few weeks later, 89-year-old Angagh MacKellar was back in class, asking her students if there was anything else she could do for them.

Yeah, they said. Come back next year.

"I told Patty the other day that I plan on coming back," Angagh said Friday. "My spirit is willing. We'll just have to see about the rest."

It's been a kick this year walking on campus with her daughter and seeing her grandson wave as he heads off to teach science while Grandma goes to teach French.

"I have never seen her smile so much," Marc said.

"It's like she's an excited, young teacher just starting out."

The books and courses are different today, but the students are the same, Angagh says. They want to learn French, just for different reasons.

"Today, it's to travel, see Paris someday, and be able to talk the language of romance. It used to be mainly about filling academic requirements and learning French literature."

The woman named Independence smiled.

"I kind of like why today's kids are learning French better," she said.