

James Branch's cool job as a mechanic maintaining fire and rescue vehicles for the city of Hopewell, Virginia is so cool, he has no plans to quit working until he cannot work anymore.

His work ethic and determination have served him well since he dropped out of high school at 16. Sitting in a classroom environment, listening was not his style of learning. When he quit school, he was required to pursue a vocational trade and chose the automotive program.

Unable to find work in that profession in his native Lunenburg County, he became an accomplished carpenter and made his living in this arena for 30 years. When the housing industry and economy turned sour, Branch realized he needed a GED to land a better job.

After completing the Inspection course, the instructor, Arnold Gayles, talked him into continuing his education. He received a certificate in Auto Technology in 2014 and then decided that he wanted to earn an Associate's Degree. For four years he drove 81 miles, one way, which equaled 3 ½ to 4 hours on the road and 5 hours in class after working 8 hours in Petersburg.

"The support and friendship of Gayles helped me keep working towards my goal," he said. He graduated Magna Cum Laude in 2016 with an Associate's Degree in Technical Studies. He is also a member of Phi Theta Kappa honor society.

Branch is very grateful for the knowledge and support that he received from SVCC especially his counselor, Matt Dunn. Branch now has a good salary and state benefits and a new career. No stranger to hard work, Branch continues to work on family cars, dabble in carpentry, raise a garden and he and his wife are parents to four daughters.

He would like for students to remember that "You are never too old to learn". He is planning to keep up with changing technology and the changing workforce. He can see that he needs to strive to be a "Life Long Learner," but it seems he has met that goal!