

THE ONLINE
LEARNER'S EXPERIENCE
Snapshots of 50 Ontarians

AN INSIDE LOOK
AT ONLINE LEARNING

WHAT WE HEARD FROM 50 ONTARIANS

Tucked quietly away in homes in often small and remote towns across Ontario are a group of truly extraordinary ‘ordinary’ people who, under often the most trying and challenging conditions, have used online learning to turn their lives around.

Through a series of face-to-face interviews, Contact North | Contact Nord is exploring the experiences of these online learners pursuing college, university, high school and literacy and basic skills training using its local online learning centres and how they made online learning work for them. A snapshot of each learner’s experience has been prepared based on the interviews.

In this piece we try to pull together some of the main themes that emerge from the snapshots

OVERCOMING ADVERSITY

Many of the snapshots told about people who had lost their jobs or suffered a personal calamity, and had turned to online learning to transform their lives. One was a 56 year old woman, whose teenage son had been killed in a car crash, and was seeking to move through her grief in a positive way; another woman herself had suffered brain damage from a car accident and needed to re-learn to read and re-develop other basic skills; one was a 56 year old man who had lost his job in a factory, but instead of retiring decided to re-train as a drilling engineer, even though he had no qualifications from high school. Throughout almost all the snapshots, there were similar compelling stories.

LOCAL DISTANCE LEARNING

One reason why such people had turned to online learning ironically was the need to stay local, where they could be supported by family and friends - or where they had to stay, because of their jobs or responsibilities to other family members: husbands or wives at work, children at school. Many of these adult learners lived many hours drive from the nearest college or university campus - one indeed drove (with her family, of course) for 16 hours to attend her graduation ceremony.

For these learners, access to local study facilities and career and educational counseling was critical. They needed local online learning centres with not just high speed access to the Internet, but also to people who could provide technical and learning support. In addition, time and time again in the snapshots, the importance of family, friends and the local online learning centre appears.

Government programs (Second Career was mentioned several times), local employment counselors, and Contact North | Contact Nord learning centre coordinators were clearly important factors in getting many of these people into an online learning program in the first place, and then keeping them there, as were local networking and support from family and friends

MOTIVATION, FOCUS AND ROLE MODELING

It was not just learners with cerebral palsy or brain damage that showed amazing determination and focus in studying online. There was the mother with two teenage daughters who was determined to be a role model by always getting her homework in on time and by showing her daughters

good study habits. Several treated online learning like a full-time job, allocating set times to work and often studying more than 30 hours a week. One 56 year old did a complete OSDD/high school program in four months. Another attended the local Contact North | Contact Nord learning centre so he wouldn't be distracted by his hobby farming at home.

THE CHALLENGE OF TECHNOLOGY - AND GOING BACK TO 'SCHOOL'

Many online learners in the snapshots came to pursuing an education a little late in life. Few would consider themselves to be digital natives. The local online learning centres for many were important in helping them get through the initial concern of using computers and the Internet. Local computer stores in smaller communities also often appeared in the snapshots as important sources of support. The weather was also a factor in causing disruption to online conferences (one advantage of asynchronous over synchronous forms of online learning.)

However, for most of the learners, technology was sometimes the solution as well as a challenge. The ability to record web conferences and return to them later helped not only when power outages occurred, but also provided opportunities for review, repetition and revision. Few felt the technology issues were major impediments to their studies.

What was more of a challenge for several in the snapshots was their lack of confidence in or even dread of 'going back to school'. Some mentioned they had experienced 'trouble at school' and lacked confidence in their ability to learn. For some, the relative anonymity of being an isolated distance learner was a bonus. They could take their own time, and not be 'known' as slower to the other students. 'They can't see the dumb look on my face when I don't understand,' said one woman.

For many though, the support of other students, both at their local online learning centres, and even more so online, was essential. This was often informal, and self-organized, rather than required by the instructor (many of the courses were delivered through web conferencing). Students would send e-mail or text messages or even phone other students in the online class. One student even created a Facebook page for the class. And - almost as a last resort - students often took the initiative to contact faculty when they felt they needed help.

It seems that once students have overcome the initial shock of going back to study or learning online for the first time, they soon get into the swing. However, getting online learners through the first week or two is critical.

THE IMPORTANCE OF TEACHING AND INSTRUCTOR SUPPORT

Many of the learners appreciated the quality of teaching and the support they received from instructors. However, this needs to be placed in context. While obviously a key factor for learner success, it was not a dominant theme. Support from family and friends and other students was equally if not more important, and this needs to be kept in mind when designing and teaching online programs. Instructors need to ensure that there are plenty of opportunities for discussion between students, and for interaction and communication with the instructor.

ONLINE LEARNING: JUST PART OF THE JOURNEY

The snapshots demonstrate the nature of lifelong learning. For many, online learning is just part of the journey. One woman started full-time at college, then found she was pregnant, so returned to her native reserve to be with her husband and family and continued her study online. Several were taking online courses as preparation for full-time study at college or university.

Increasingly learners move between online and campus-based learning. The boundaries are less and less clear, and matter less and less to students. They are looking for whatever fits best with their life cycle and life demands.

MEETING THE DEMANDS OF A FLEXIBLE WORK FORCE

Online learning is enabling Ontarians, often in remote communities, to adjust to mill closures, factory lay-offs and government redundancies, and to enable them to train for - and eventually get - jobs in areas where there are still shortages of skilled labour. The contribution of these online programs to the province's GDP is two-fold: it enables people to get off welfare, and enables them to contribute to the economic development of the province through their new skills. It also helps families to keep together and maintain their local roots and cultures.

GLORY: THE ROAD TO SUCCESS

Probably the most heartening thing of all in the snapshots was the feeling of satisfaction and accomplishment expressed by the learners. Students with no basic skills or high school qualifications moving on to study for a college diploma; people changing careers and finding more satisfying work; unemployed people finding work through their online studying; students staying home to look after family while still being successful in college or university. And above all, gaining in self-confidence and the ability to learn and go on learning, feeling they are making a contribution, and becoming better people as a result.

For many in the snapshots, online learning was the door, the portal through which they were able to walk into a new life. They also came to appreciate the joy of a lifestyle of lifelong learning. No-one mentioned a 'second-class' education; all felt proud to have learned in this way. Some came top in their class, outscoring campus-based students. For others, just finishing was a huge achievement.

These learners have demonstrated something more than just intellectual ability or cleverness, often under the most challenging of conditions: determination, self-discipline, and the value of family, friends and other students in developing their knowledge and skills. True guts and glory.

WHERE THE 50 ONTARIANS LIVE



ALICIA ABRA

PERSONAL SUPPORT WORKER
EXETER

“Once I got into it, I liked it. I was nervous about raising my hand, feeling uncomfortable speaking into the microphone and wondering how you sound. It seems silly now.”



The idea of going to school so she could work in the health field took root when Alicia Abra completed a first aid course for work and really enjoyed it. She soon found herself in the Center for Employment and Learning in Exeter and being introduced to the Contact North | Contact Nord online learning centre coordinator.

“When I first researched the Personal Support Worker diploma I was a little overwhelmed, could I actually do this course?” she reflects back to her decision. “I had gone to college before for graphic design but dropped out.”

What convinced her was that she could register with Sault College and take her classes at the online learning centre. She only lived a few minutes away from the centre and preferred to use their computers rather than work from home.

The coordinator at the centre helped Alicia get acquainted with the computer and the Centra program they use for audio classes.

“Once I got into it, I liked it. I was nervous about raising my hand, feeling uncomfortable speaking into the microphone and wondering how you sound. It seems silly now,” she said.

Her first challenge was to secure funding which she did through a line of credit at her bank. She was also the mother of a toddler and pregnant with her second child.

Although she had a lot on her plate, working full time, a toddler, classes several times a week and homework, it all seemed to fall into place. The timing of her pregnancy even worked out, she didn’t even miss a class when she had her baby.

“I felt like this was my opportunity and I just needed to do it,” says Alicia. “My main support was my partner who took over cooking duties or putting our daughter to bed. He knew I wanted to change careers. If it wasn’t for him I would be super stressed.”

Knowing of other people who tackled career changes in their busy lives provided valuable encouragement. Inspiration came from knowing that her grandmother had gone back to school when she was 40 to change careers and she learned about another Contact North | Contact Nord student with four kids who completed her diploma was also inspiring. When she received her grades and saw how well she was doing, it further indicated to her that she was on the right track.

Having the opportunity to take her courses at the Contact North | Contact Nord online learning centre in Exeter in the evening and only a few minute walk from her home, allowed her to continue working full time until her maternity leave.

Her teachers were supportive when she had her baby and needed to put her placement off until she spent some time with her newborn. Most graduates with a Personal Support Worker diploma often find jobs quickly and Alicia feels confident about her future job prospects.

“I feel like I accomplished something important to me, and it would be nice to advance further and take more courses, maybe even nursing,” said Alicia.

SABRINA BEACHAM

EDUCATIONAL ASSISTANT

KENORA

"I will work well in the schools because I have empathy for the students, I know their frustration."



Hearing about a friend take the plunge into post-secondary education was enough to motivate Sabrina Beacham to reach for her dream job of working with children.

"I was 28 years old and wanted something else," she recalled. "I was married, and eventually wanted a family and would need a good career to provide for children."

The only obstacle was the confidence to face the classroom again. "Hearing my friend talk about taking the Educational Assistant course, I realized I wanted to do that," said Sabrina. She went into the Contact North | Contact Nord online learning centre in Kenora and met with the coordinator. Three weeks after that casual conversation with her friend, she was sitting in the classroom.

Her confidence issue was tamed by distance education. "Actually I liked distance education better because if my answer was a bit off at least I didn't see other people's reaction," she said with a grin. Her shyness evaporated and she found herself participating more than she would in a full classroom setting.

Her class in Kenora was comprised of only one other student, which she preferred because her esteem as a student with learning disabilities was protected from the gaze of other students.

There were more features of distance education that Sabrina liked such as being able to attend her 8:30 am class from home. Although she preferred to go into the Contact North | Contact Nord online learning centre in Kenora, it was convenient for an early morning class.

If the weather was bad and the system went down, she would be able to listen to the recording of the class session later using Contact North | Contact Nord's web conferencing platform.

The teacher, who travelled to different campuses to teach, would rotate to the Kenora campus. The other 15 students in the program that year were scattered across the province.

When it came to tests and assignments, Sabrina really struggled. Some teachers didn't understand but she found an ally in her program coordinator and she worked with a tutor to meet the challenge.

Once Sabrina began her placement in a local elementary school, she realized what she had to offer in her new career.

"The things I learned in the classroom did not click until I reached my placement. I am a kinaesthetic learner," Sabrina acknowledges. She knows very well what it is like to struggle in school, exacerbated by a learning disability and not receiving the support she had needed.

"I will work well in the schools because I have empathy for the students, I know their frustration," she said.

When she did reach her placement, she shone. The struggles she had with tests and assignments were behind her and she was able to apply what she had learned. Along with her own childhood experience, she impacted the lives of several students and impressed the school administrators.

In a job climate of few permanent positions in the schools, Sabrina was hired on as a permanent employee after graduation.

WAYNE BARRY

SOCIAL SERVICE WORKER

PARRY SOUND

“When I was in grade one we had a student in our class who had developmental problems, I was the one who became his friend.”



For a dozen years Wayne Barry was hauling 40 bales of steel with a pitchfork every day until his body said no more. What appeared to be a devastating situation, in fact turned into an opportunity of a lifetime.

As he sought an alternative future what he discovered was that although he lived a significant distance from a college or university campus, college programs were available locally at the Contact North | Contact Nord online learning centre in Parry Sound.

He decided he would turn this situation into an opportunity and take the social service worker diploma from Northern College.

“I always loved helping people,” he admits. “When I was in grade one we had a student in our class who had developmental problems, I was the one who became his friend.”

Returning to the classroom at 52 years old was daunting especially facing his class mates at the Parry Sound online learning centre who consisted of three twenty five year old women. At first he felt they wouldn’t have much in common, however, over the two years they became supportive friends.

“I was excited about the program but I was also scared to death on the first day, my hands were shaking,” he described. The shaking hands did not last long and within a few weeks everyone was working well together. In fact he was the only man in the entire course.

Through the online chat forums Wayne expanded his circle of friends and support in the program, including talking on the phone to classmates across the province.

“I found the technology pretty simple. Anyone who has basic computer skills can do it. After the first day it all fell into place,” he explained. “When it came to the course material, each of us struggled with parts but we helped each other.”

His biggest concern was being able to write an essay. Once he was given the structure it became very easy. “I had some homework challenges because I do not have great typing skills. I would hand write my notes all week and then spend Saturday and Sunday typing them up and getting my assignments completed,” he explained. “It worked, that’s all I know!”

He found the routine valuable because it also helped him retain what he was learning. He remained focused and interested. His maturity gave him the motivation to put his all into his studies and in fact graduate with honours.

Shortly after graduation, he was offered a job at the YMCA Employment Centre. “This job is a good fit, my supervisor calls me the mayor,” he said with a chuckle.

He has been working at the YMCA for two and a half years and says it is the only job he has ever loved coming to every morning. There are many people who come into the office who are facing a similar situation that he overcame and appreciates the opportunity to pass on his experience and hope.

ADAM BOISSONNEAULT

EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION
APPRENTICESHIP

SIOUX LOOKOUT

“Once you had the hang of it, it went well. There is no texting or stepping out of the class and no teacher helping all the time but they do make themselves available through email and phone calls.”



Born and raised in Sioux Lookout, Adam Boissonneault spent 17 years working for the local mill like many other young men in his town. Getting laid off was a significant event in his life. “I was over 40 years old and I didn’t know what I was going to do. It was scary,” recalls Adam.

“Just out of desperation I knew the town was looking for casual daycare workers. The pay was pretty good however I didn’t know a whole lot about children other than raising my own son,” he admits. Adam, who became a father for the first time in his early 40’s, discovered that he really enjoyed the daycare setting, and that he was actually good at his job.

Sioux Lookout is a small town that services several fly-in First Nations communities. It is a four hour drive from Thunder Bay to the east, and six hour drive from Winnipeg to the west. For Adam to attend school on campus, it would mean either leaving his family or moving everyone while he completed his studies.

It was his supervisor at the daycare that suggested he enrol in the Early Childhood Education Apprenticeship program through the Contact North | Contact Nord online learning centre in Sioux Lookout. They offered him a position in the daycare and it became an opportunity he had never imagined possible.

Adam expects to be in the apprenticeship program for about six years. The biggest challenge he has encountered so far is the discipline required to work full-time and do his schoolwork.

He puts a full day in at the daycare and does his coursework in the evening and on weekends. When he is tired after a long day with the kids, he must motivate himself away from the couch and television, and get to his desk instead.

He is realistic about what he can accomplish. Three courses per semester is his maximum. However, if he needs to scale back he can, it just means he will take a bit longer to complete the program.

With a supportive employer and family, he feels confident he can transform himself from a mill worker to a childcare worker.

A challenge he turned into an asset was learning to be an active listener.

“The Centra-based [web conferencing platform] course meant you only heard the voice of your professor and other classmates. There was only one other student in the room with me, but we couldn’t see the teacher or other classmates,” he explained.

Compensating for the absence of personal contact, Adam improved skills he didn’t realize he had.

“Once you had the hang of it, it went well. There is no texting or stepping out of the class and no teacher helping all the time but they do make themselves available through email and phone calls,” said Adam.

He often exclaims how incredible it is that he faced a devastating layoff yet right around the corner was a new career that he would never have considered. Not only does he love his new work but he has the added bonus of working in the daycare that his own son attends.

TERRI BURROWS

SOCIAL SERVICE WORKER

TERRACE BAY

"It was a very difficult time. I had to work through the funeral to meet an assignment, but it also came as a learning experience. I discovered just how strong I could be."



Taking the Social Service Worker diploma from Northern College offered Terri Burrows more than she anticipated. In 2010 she found herself unemployed and wanted to add post secondary education to her resume in order to secure a job working in the schools. What she gained was not only a college diploma but valuable personal growth experience.

"It was a personally rewarding and interesting program," described Terri. "It was challenging but I also learned a lot about myself."

Terri lives in Terrace Bay, a small town of about 1,700 people, on the shores of Lake Superior. It is a good 60 minute drive from Thunder Bay and not suitable for a daily commute.

Terri had already raised her children who were now in their mid 20's. She had been working at the Home Hardware for seven years before getting laid off and she really wanted to get out of retail and into the social services field.

"I had gone into the Contact North | Contact Nord online learning centre in Terrace Bay to see what courses were available. I had tried a bookkeeping course a few years earlier but it didn't work out. However this time it seemed more user friendly," she said.

Technology had improved and she actually likes learning through distance education. "At first it felt odd but it didn't take long to feel like you were in the class environment even though I was the only one in Terrace Bay," she described.

One of her teachers helped the students deal with the strangeness of not being in the same classroom by sharing a video of herself. The students used the chat rooms but also Facebook and Skype to stay connected. She also met some of her classmates at a lab session held in Thunder Bay.

"The teacher really encouraged us to work online and we worked on a group project, we actually had fun collaborating that way," she said.

During her last semester Terri suffered the loss of her brother when he suddenly died. She lost 10 days of her studies in order to attend the funeral in British Columbia.

"It was a very difficult time. I had to work through the funeral to meet an assignment, but it also came as a learning experience. I discovered just how strong I could be," she reflected. Terri pulled off 95% on that assignment.

She has not landed a job in the school just yet, but remains hopeful and grateful for the valuable experience otherwise.

SAMANTHA CASE

POLICE FOUNDATIONS

WIKWEMIKONG

“We have one teacher who teaches from home. He uses his webcam, has his notes and you can see his dog running around.”



Having the opportunity to attend college in Wikwemikong Unceded Indian Reserve has Samantha Case back on track with her education.

With the Contact North | Contact Nord Wikwemikong online learning centre located right in the Wikwemikong high school, college courses can be taken without having to leave the community.

When Samantha finished high school, she headed off to Cambrian College in Sudbury, over 300 km from home, to pursue a diploma in Police Foundations. However, shortly after enrolling, she discovered she was pregnant. Her schooling needed to be put on hold, but not forgotten.

“I didn’t want to choose between my family and my education. I chose my family,” said Samantha.

Five years later, with a husband and two children at home, she learned about the Contact North | Contact Nord online learning centre, a twenty minute drive from home. When she went in to see what was available, she was thrilled to learn that the Police Foundations course could be taken online.

“At the centre everyone is interacting on their computer not really aware of what others are doing. We sit in our cubicle, our own little area, we have our microphone, we can hear our teacher and classmates or sometimes video – it’s still like you are in a class,” explained Samantha.

“When I was on the college campus I was going out all the time, involved in the busy campus life, but with going into the centre, I can concentrate on my studies,” said Samantha.

If she misses a class, she doesn’t worry too much because the classes are recorded in the web conferencing system and she can play them back at home.

Samantha describes herself as a people person and likes the interaction with other students. When doing her studies online, she has often been the one who starts the conversation.

Samantha is comfortable with technology; it is more about how she can best interact with her teachers and classmates that challenges her.

“We text chat,” explained Samantha. “I just introduce myself and others will respond.”

She has made a few friends who she discusses assignments and course material with. One friend is in Longlac and another in Moosonee. They use Facebook, which Samantha took the initiative to start for the class, and Skype.

Teachers have welcomed her need to touch base sometimes on a daily basis through e-mail and text chat.

“We have one teacher who teaches from home. He uses his webcam, has his notes and you can see his dog running around,” she said. She likes that because not only can she see what he looks like, but a little bit of his personality.

The biggest drawback to online education for Samantha is that she really wants to meet her teachers and classmates, and realizes she may never meet them in person.

Although she is at a distance from teachers and classmates, she’s grateful that she can stay in her community with her family and still get a college diploma.

ARDIS CHEDORE

PERSONAL SUPPORT WORKER
COCHRANE

“It wasn’t overwhelming doing it at a distance. The staff at the Contact North | Contact Nord online learning centre showed me how to use the webconference and video conference programs and it was simple.”



During a brief stay in the hospital, Ardis Chedore decided she wanted to be a nurse. “I had a nurse, who was everything you wanted a nurse to be, and then I had another nurse and she was the nurse from hell,” she described. “I wanted to be the good nurse.”

At the time she was waitressing in a bar in Cochrane and had been there for six years. After the hospital stay, she kept thinking about how she would go about getting her credentials to be a nurse. Through investigating her options it became overwhelming. It was a lot of money and dedicated time, and she would have to move to Timmins but her husband was established in Cochrane. She put the idea aside for the time being.

However friends, who had taken the Personal Support Worker diploma, were happy with their work and encouraged her to study through the Contact North | Contact Nord online learning centre in Cochrane.

Ardis was able to secure funding through the Friendship Centre as a Métis student and start the one year course with Sault College.

“It wasn’t overwhelming doing it at a distance. The staff at the Contact North | Contact Nord online learning centre showed me how to use the webconference and video conference programs and it was simple,” she said.

When she had to work and miss a class, the class was recorded and she could playback the class at home. When the weather was bad during the winter months, she got herself set up at home to participate in her classes.

Her two other Cochrane classmates provided a ready support group but she also made friends with classmates around the province.

“The three of us got along great. It is easier to learn with less people around, more people would be distracting,” she said. When they had questions, they would discuss first and then ask the teacher together.

She would go into the centre to get away from the distractions at home and found a good routine of going into the centre. She was there three nights a week and they had a big table to lay out all her books while taking classes and doing homework.

The program had a lot of group projects and classmates would team up. She had one project with someone from a First Nation community and they would use Skype and e-mail to work together.

A major challenge during her course was when the college went on strike. “The first two semesters were a breeze, however in the last two semesters during the strike the communication broke down,” she explained. It was especially stressful when an assignment was due and making sure the teacher received it by the deadline.

“Most of the teachers were good and many were new to distance education and still adjusting,” she said.

Her overall plan was to test out the field by taking the Personal Support Worker diploma and if she enjoyed and could do well, she could look into the nursing diploma.

However in the meantime, Ardis and her husband decided to adopt children. She graduated in May 2012 and had clients immediately that she worked independently with. Her options are vast though, she can work in child care, with new mothers, seniors, and it will help with being a new mother of adopted children.

KUNAL DEB CHUNDRA

LITERACY AND BASIC SKILLS

ORLÉANS

“I work the night shift so being able to do courses from home means I can take them when it is convenient for my schedule. Taking courses online saves so much time, there is no travel.”



Taking the Sioux Hudson Literacy Council courses was a way for Kunal Deb Chundra to keep his mind busy with learning rather than worry.

He started with one course and found he really enjoyed what and how he was learning.

“I have been doing these courses for the past year and I find each one very interesting. I learn from the other students as well as the teacher,” he explained.

“We can hear the teacher and also interact with our classmates,” he said. It was somewhat of a surprise to him that an online course could offer that interchange with classmates.

He does not feel the pressure to learn but simply enjoy learning new things. His favourite was an Excel course which helps him manage his budget.

He takes the courses from home yet likes knowing that staff at the Contact North | Contact Nord online learning centre in Orléans, a suburb outside of Ottawa, is available to help him when needed.

Kunal had taken college courses in hospitality however struggled with a learning disability and discomfort with being in a large classroom. He much prefers the ability to access education at a distance.

“I work the night shift so being able to do courses from home means I can take them when it is convenient for my schedule,” he said. “Taking courses online saves so much time, there is no travel.”

With such abnormal working hours, he must find a good balance between spending time with his family, working and doing the courses.

Kunal is comfortable working on the computer but likes the opportunity to keep up to date with changing hardware and software programs.

This type of education fits his personality and lifestyle, and this experience is preparing him to possibly take an online accounting diploma in the future.

ASHLEY COE

EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION
MADOC

"I was doubtful about my ability to manage a newborn baby and completing my diploma, however very glad I did."



When Ashley Coe decided she was ready to take a college program, she knew it needed to be through distance education. After completing high school she took a break and worked for a few years and then headed to school to take the Early Childhood Education apprenticeship.

She went into the Contact North | Contact Nord online learning centre in Madoc, located in her old high school, and registered for the program.

"It is very convenient to live in a little town like Marmora and Madoc and still go to school without having to go into Belleville," she said.

Ashley was born and raised in Marmora, a community of 500, and a short 20 minute drive to the 401 and Belleville. She likes living where everyone knows everyone. She has no desire to leave.

Her courses are all online, along with the text book. There are no audio or video classes. However, there are discussion boards for students to share questions and discuss assignments. It also requires her to complete 168 hours working in a daycare.

It can get overwhelming with juggling her reading and assignments with placement hours. The other challenge was finding out she was pregnant a month after she registered.

Although she has learned a great deal that has made her a better mother, she needs to be far more organized with her time.

"It's harder to do homework at home so I got it done while I was at the centre. I put in about 20 hours a week. Full days unless I got my assignment done and could leave early," she explained. "Friday was often crunch time."

Her parents were close by and helped out with babysitting which took a lot of the worry stress away.

She had additional help with her studies as well. Her older sister did the diploma several years earlier and works in a daycare. "I was often thinking too much and she helped me focus," she admitted.

Her one other classmate, who she knew previously, met her at the centre everyday to work together. They supported each other by talking about assignments and brainstorming on any questions.

It was a busy time completing the diploma. In one semester, she had four classes and her placement hours. She was comfortable in her placement because she did a co-op placement in the school and learned a lot from her supervisor. Her placement was working with 36 kindergarten students and a number with behavioural problems. She often used her supervisor as a resource for her written assignments.

Ashley admits, "I was doubtful about my ability to manage a newborn baby and completing my diploma, however very glad I did."

SHANNON COSTELLO

EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION
SOUTH PORCUPINE

“It can be difficult. As an adult learner there is much more happening in your life, but it is the easiest way to work and get an education.”



Getting promoted to Supervisor at the Timmins YMCA child care centre was only possible for Shannon Costello because she could obtain her qualifications through the apprenticeship program offered through distance education.

The Timmins YMCA is supportive of staff pursuing their education, and in fact there are seven childcare workers enrolled in the Early Childhood Education (ECE) apprenticeship program.

Shannon has been working towards obtaining her ECE diploma from Canadore College since 2008. She loves working with children and had progressed her way to Supervisor however she needed the diploma to satisfy government regulations to remain in the position.

For Shannon it was beneficial to combine her hands-on job experience with her studies. The biggest challenges have more to do with finding enough time in her day. She often works 50 to 60 hour weeks and has a 2 year old daughter.

“It can be difficult,” says Shannon. “As an adult learner there is much more happening in your life, but it is the easiest way to work and get an education.”

She has learned to work efficiently in order to meet the demands of her classes. Because she is already working in the field she often uses her work experience for assignments. With so many of her co-workers in the same program, they support each other.

“When you are not face to face you don’t feel the push to get things done and then leave everything to the last minute, that’s when I have to shut my office door and get some work done,” admitted Shannon.

She attended Canadore College in North Bay for the Recreation and Leisure diploma and Northern College in South Porcupine for the Educational Assistant diploma. She also received a certificate in Human Resources management. Shannon knows what it takes to complete a college program.

This is the first time she is taking her classes at a distance. It fits well with her life now. She takes two classes per semester. Although her co-workers are taking the same program they are not necessarily in the same class. They are able to share books and study together though.

Because she is already working in her field she knows many of her teachers professionally. Reaching out to teachers is simply a quick phone call. In fact Shannon would like to be one of those teachers one day.

When she arrives for class she is ready to learn which can sometimes be more than listening to the lecture. Because of her extensive experience in the field already, when other students are asking questions about topics she is already familiar, she will take the time to work on her own until they have caught up. Or when there are technical difficulties and the class is temporarily suspended, she uses the time to catch up on assignments.

Blending family, work and school for a few years may be leaving her with little time, but well worth the effort when it is complete.

CHANTAL COTE

BUSINESS ACCOUNTING

COCHRANE

“Depends on why you want to take distance education, for me my employer gave me the chance to do courses during work hours.”



After leaving the small northern town of Cochrane, Chantal Cote wanted to learn about aesthetics. When her boyfriend was offered a job as a civil engineer back home they returned.

As she was looking for work she found herself reading his math books and missing her love of math. “I missed doing math,” Chantal said. “I was really good at it. When I was in high school my teachers always encouraged me to go into accounting.”

Learning about the Contact North | Contact Nord online learning centre, she decided to register for the Business Accounting diploma through Northern College.

She worked full time while taking her courses. Arriving at work for 7:00 a.m., and taking time out during her work day to attend a class at the online learning centre. Chantal knows that she is good at learning on her own, making distance education a good match for her.

“Depends on why you want to take distance education, for me my employer gave me the chance to do courses during work hours,” she explained. Chantal needed a school schedule that fit her life. She had a significant relationship, they owned their own home and she needed to keep working.

“I really liked the video conferences and that we could play back the audio courses if I wasn’t able to attend a class,” she said. The teachers were helpful and she liked the support of other students. When she attended high school and later college on campus, it was hard sitting in the classroom for long days. This form of education and learning is a much better fit for her.

Chantal came to realize how much she liked learning and that it did not mean having to sacrifice where she chose to live. Since graduating in 2009, she has been taking a few courses every semester to obtain her Certified General Accounting credential, another program that is offered at a distance. With her positive experience and disciplined skills she is easily moving through the courses.

Her job opportunities have improved from waiting tables to working in the town council hall, an accounting firm and now she has another job promotion on the horizon.

She reflects back to how her college teachers would ask why she did not attend university, but now she feels confident and settled to look at obtaining a Bachelor of Commerce someday.

GORD DAWSON

ONTARIO SECONDARY SCHOOL
DIPLOMA

PORT HOPE

"I sent out many resumes with no response - they will not even look at you without an education."



At 56 years old, Gord Dawson completed his entire high school education in just four months. Gord found himself without a job and the need for retraining at an age when others are hunkering down for retirement.

His factory jobs never required him to have a high school or college education.

"I sent out many resumes with no response - they will not even look at you without an education," he said about those first few weeks of unemployment.

Making the best of his situation, Gord decided to use the Ontario Government's Second Career program and go back for retraining. With some long-ago experience in underground mining and a love of the environment, he chose the two-year Resource Drilling and Blasting diploma at Sir Sanford Fleming College.

The first step was to complete a Canadian Achievement Test (CAT) for admission to college. What came back was Gord's first hurdle - he needed to get two high school English and two high school math credits. Digging back for his high school transcripts revealed that there were no transcripts. In fact, Gord had completed grade 11, however, the high school didn't have any records. Gord was faced with the daunting task of making up an entire high school education before being able to take the next step.

With the encouragement of his wife, Gord found his way to the

Contact North | Contact Nord online learning centre in Port Hope where he would be set up on the computer with his online high school courses to complete.

Motivated by the desire to get himself registered for his chosen program at Sir Sanford Fleming College, Gord dedicated over 30 hours per week to his studies. Monday through Friday, you could find Gord on the computer at the Port Hope centre, occasionally taking a quick break, but applying his strong work ethic to get each course completed.

Gord and his wife own a large piece of land with an organic garden boasting 300 head of lettuce, tomatoes, and more. They have bee hives for honey, maple syrup and their dogs. He is happiest tending his garden, chopping wood or walking his dogs. However, it also makes for an environment where distraction is everywhere and having the opportunity to go into the Port Hope centre allowed him to focus.

He and his wife love their lifestyle, and for Gord to lose his job was an incredible set back. "I want to be a little farmer," said Gord. "But I gotta go to work to make money."

Gord might have lost time and opportunities if he had lamented over his unfortunate circumstance, but finding the right college program set him on the path that will get him through the next challenge of his life.

Gord found hope when he realized what appeared impossible was overcome with courage, dedication and the support of an education system. On the verge of completing his OSSD, he reflects on the challenges he has faced. From the shock of losing his job at 56 years old, sending out resumes with no results, to meeting with the Port Hope Centre Coordinator who helped him find the path to a new job and career. Then tackling the biggest hurdle of completing his OSSD after 30 years of not being in school, he can say with deep conviction, going back to school was the best move he made.

TAMMY DELORME

NATIVE CHILD AND FAMILY WORKER
RED LAKE

“When I went to Contact North | Contact Nord online learning centre, the computer was ready, my class was ready, and my audio was all hooked up. I just showed up, it was just like arriving on campus.”



The isolated northern community of Red Lake offers an abundance of natural beauty, but it also has a number of distance education opportunities.

Tammy Delorme, a Métis mother of three sons, and a child services worker, lives in Red Lake and needed to upgrade her education to move into a better job.

“I was working as a child care worker, without credentials, and it was overwhelming,” said Tammy. She stepped down from the position and took a course in Health Administration at the local Confederation College campus. She was able to remain in the organization but now doing paperwork and reception.

Tammy is working in a field that is in great need of good front line staff. Her employer, Tikinagan Child and Family Services, is supportive and has encouraged her to head back to school for the Native Child and Family Worker diploma at Confederation College.

With the Contact North | Contact Nord online learning centre in Red Lake, she is able to remain in her community, continue working and obtain her diploma. With her employer’s support, she is able to take classes during the day which fits well with her work and family schedule. It does help that both her workplace and the Contact North | Contact Nord online learning centre are just a few blocks away from each other.

“I had my own room with the video screen and headset,” described Tammy. “When I went to Contact North | Contact Nord online learning centre, the computer was ready, my class was ready, and my audio was all hooked up. I just showed up, it was just like arriving on campus.”

Tammy has a busy life to juggle. Although she sometimes does her school work at home, having her employer’s support to take classes during the day, without distractions, means she can be more productive.

With her experience taking classes on a college campus, she was familiar with the routine and time required to get assignments completed. She also knew what she was missing without the teachers and students present. The imperfections of the technology, or being the only student in Red Lake, were less distracting because she was grateful to find a way to attend school while working and raising her children. She didn’t feel so alone with coworkers who could help her with course material, and the Contact North | Contact Nord online learning centre in Red Lake was always available to resolve any issues with technology.

She is excited about what she has been learning especially since they fill the gaps to her own previous experience in the position.

When she felt the classes were less organized or poorly presented, she felt confident to share her unique perspective with teachers about how to improve the experience for students at a distance. She was determined to improve the quality of distance education by participating in feedback.

With a college diploma, plus her previous experience in the field, she is looking forward to returning to the frontline equipped with new knowledge, in a position more suitable for her, and with an improved wage.

SABRINA DESAULNIER

LAW CLERK

DRYDEN

“At first speaking up and asking questions felt strange but the nice thing is there is no anxiety from everyone watching you.”



Going through struggles can be well worth the pain when all the pieces start to come together. That is how Sabrina Desaulnier would describe how she landed in her new job at a law firm.

After high school, she left her home town of Dryden to venture off to theatre school in Alberta. Unfortunately it didn't work out, and she returned home. Eventually she decided to try school again when her daughter was 18 months old, but this time she wasn't leaving her family.

Working with the Contact North | Contact Nord online learning centre in Dryden she decided to enrol in the Law Clerk diploma from Northern College.

“I always enjoyed law when I took it in high school and I wanted something secure since I am a single parent,” she explained.

She was the only student taking the course from the Contact North | Contact Nord online learning centre in Dryden. Being alone, and having only e-mail contact with professors, was challenging in the first year.

However, once she had established a relationship with her professors, they became her ally especially when she needed some flexibility because of the demands of being a single parent.

She also lives on her own and funds are limited while she attends school. To stay on budget, she didn't have internet at home, so Sabrina did most of her homework at the online learning centre. That means she works a strict disciplined routine of attending school at the centre while her daughter is at daycare.

The learning part was somewhat awkward at first for her, getting familiar with the technology. With a few cheat sheets she became comfortable with using the computer.

“At first speaking up and asking questions felt strange but the nice thing is there is no anxiety from everyone watching you,” she explained.

When it came time to do her assignments, she found her answers in text books or resources online. “Blackboard, the college communication program, had a resource section and I found it helpful. Could access libraries, website listings and all the slide presentations from the classes,” she said.

Distance education was in fact working well for her situation.

“I worked very hard,” said Sabrina. “I had a 4.0 average, straight A's and on the Dean's list, but I had no social life. Every night was homework.”

When it came time for her placement, she approached a local law firm. The placement turned into part-time work while still attending school and the promise of a full-time position once she graduated.

“It's amazing! I would never have been able to do my job without the training I received from the Law Clerk diploma. I am the real estate and corporate clerk now,” she said. “Someday I would like to become a paralegal.”

Since succeeding with her Law Clerk diploma through distance education, she has confidence to pursue additional education at a distance.

DONNA DOUCETTE

BUSINESS ADMINISTRATIVE
ACCOUNTING

ATIKOKAN

It wasn't an easy transition for her though. "It was a big class and sometimes I would feel like an outsider. It helped when the teacher would do a check in with everyone in the class though."



Donna Doucette was like many other residents of Atikokan who lost their job due to the only large industry closing.

"I got my job at the mill right out of high school and never thought of what I wanted to do. I was there for 20 years," Donna explained.

When she lost her job it was incredibly discouraging however after attending a local career fair she learned about the Business Administrative Accounting diploma offered by Northern College. A three-year program she could take right in Atikokan at the Contact North | Contact Nord online learning centre.

"My children were in grade 6 and grade 8, we couldn't leave so I could go to school," she said.

Donna was excited about going back to school and also terrified wondering if she would have the discipline and ability for learning, homework and tests. However, after her first test, which she did well on, it was confirmation for her that she could handle doing a college diploma.

She was one of three students taking the courses at the centre through audio and video conferencing. "I also built friendships with others online or talking during breaks in the class," she explained. They all helped each other with assignments. She had come into the program with previous knowledge since she had worked in an accounting environment before and she was familiar with many of the concepts and tasks.

It wasn't an easy transition for her though. "It was a big class and sometimes I would feel like an outsider. It helped when the teacher would do a check in with everyone in the class though."

She attended classes while her children were at school and sometimes they would do homework together.

Donna graduated in 2011 and went on to take the Certified General Accountant program which is all online learning. With her positive experience and developing her skill to learn at a distance, she is taking an advanced level program. She says she does not mind learning mainly from a text book.

"I got hooked into learning from that experience, there is so much to learn and never realized that so much opportunity is available," she said.

Now her son is in grade 12 and preparing for his post-secondary education. She has been able to encourage him to consider studying at home until he is ready to leave.

Donna also feels excited about the work she has been able to obtain with her credentials and the potential for more freedom by using her skills in self employment.

ERIC DUCHARME

PERSONAL SUPPORT WORKER

SOUTH PORCUPINE

“The PSW program, and the job, have really changed my life, even my social circle, and making better money. I have a new set of friends and they help me as I work towards becoming an RPN.”



It was one step at a time for Eric Ducharme to achieve his career aspirations. It started while he was content working at the Book Bin in downtown Timmins. He saw the advertisement for a part-time Personal Support Worker program offered by Sault College. He decided that would be his next step.

He called Sault College and learned that he would not have to leave Timmins but could go into the Contact North | Contact Nord online learning centre in South Porcupine to register for the program and participate in the classes.

“I had really enjoyed working in the book store but I needed a change and a career that I could make enough money. I realized I wanted to be in the health field, the PSW program was a good start,” explained Eric.

He continued working at the bookstore and took his classes at night. “I was the only one at the Contact North | Contact Nord online learning centre for my class but I liked that, no distractions from other students around me, letting me focus more on the teacher,” he said.

He achieved good grades and getting on the honour roll by working out of the Contact North | Contact Nord online learning centre, limiting his involvement with students outside of his class work and keeping his life really organized.

Although he had been working in the bookstore for five years, he was familiar with the requirements of a college diploma. He had attended Cambrian College, in Sudbury, for the Police Foundations program. What he liked about distance education was his ability to focus. Work was work, home was home and coming into the Contact North | Contact Nord online learning centre was for school. When he arrived for class, everything he needed was ready.

“When we had a lab class, the teacher would use a webcam to demonstrate procedures and then I would describe back to her what I would need to do, still on the webcam,” described Eric about his class experience.

Upon completion of the PSW program, he took a job at Extendicare and has discovered his love of working with seniors.

“The PSW program, and the job, have really changed my life, even my social circle, and making better money. I have a new set of friends and they help me as I work towards becoming an RPN,” he said.

He admits his job has brought significant changes for him in his lifestyle but he has also faced the underside of working with seniors, which is death. It is a daily part of his job.

Two years after completing the Personal Support Worker program, the next step was obvious, start working towards the Registered Practical Nurse credential. Because he was a seasoned distance education learner, taking a few courses through OntarioLearn was easy to juggle with the demands of his job at Extendicare.

The very next step on this long journey is for Eric to take a leave of absence and complete his RPN credential as a full-time student which he has planned for next year.

TANYA DUMOCHEL

SOCIAL SERVICE WORKER

RED LAKE

“Since it was over five years since I was in the program, I had to redo it. It was easier the second time though.”



Tanya Dumochel lives in Red Lake, a small town several hours drive north of Dryden. She moved there from Timmins for her husband’s job as an underground electrician.

“It’s a good place for families. Always lots to do like hiking and snowmobiling,” she said.

However, not a great place for store options, services or schools. She wanted to finish her education in the Social Service Worker program from Northern College. When she was 19, she had to drop the completion of her program when a family tragedy struck.

Five years later, she wanted to finish the diploma she had started. She was a few months away from moving to Red Lake and when she made inquiries to Northern College about completing her diploma from Red Lake, they let her know it would be possible through Contact North | Contact Nord.

“Since it was over five years since I was in the program, I had to redo it. It was easier the second time though,” she said.

This time she had her son and husband so she found it easier to simply go into the Contact North | Contact Nord online learning centre in Red Lake. “I could focus and concentrate at the centre, and everything is on hand there too,” she explained.

Tanya was pregnant during the last part of her studies and gave birth to her second child, a daughter, the same day she would have graduated. Her classmates called her at the hospital from their celebrations at the college so she wouldn’t miss celebrating their achievement together.”

“It is important for communities like Red Lake to have distance education so people don’t have to leave,” she said. Tanya has been sharing her experience as a distance education student at the local high school because many young people would like to be able to stay and get their education.

“I talk about how I did my studies at the Contact North | Contact Nord centre and all the resources available there,” she explained.

Tanya is not finished her education. She is now preparing to take university courses to obtain a Bachelor of Arts in Psychology. Once she has her two year old daughter in daycare, it will allow more time to concentrate on schoolwork.

Tanya and her family like their lifestyle in the North and plan to stay for a long time. Having easy access to pursue her own career goals has made living far away from larger city centres possible.

GASTON ETHIER

SOCIAL SERVICE WORKER

KAPUSKASING

“If I have an issue I send an email, mostly because I can get anxious on the phone, so it works.”



It is never too late to get an education. Gaston Ethier can attest to the thrill of finally getting his high school diploma at 57 years old.

Gaston began working as a lumberjack in Kapuskasing when he was only 14 years old. A life of using chainsaws and other heavy equipment left his body in rough shape. When he finally sought Worker’s Compensation as he could no longer work in his field, he was encouraged to consider taking a course and discover a new career.

He had really enjoyed working with couples at his local parish and decided the only field he wanted to work in was to help couples and families in his community. He approached Northern College about their Social Service Worker program and they led him to his local Contact North | Contact Nord online learning centre in Kapuskasing.

His first task was to complete his high school diploma in preparation to take the college courses.

At 58 years old, with his high school diploma completed, he joined six other students at the Contact North | Contact Nord Kapuskasing online learning centre for the Social Service Worker program.

“I walk here to the centre. It’s only two minutes from home,” Gaston said. “I feel lucky because they take good care of me here. I have poor eyesight and we are able to use the big screen, and they also found me a comfortable chair that does not bother my back injury.”

Although he appreciates being able to stay in his community and complete his studies, he has also felt like quitting many times. With the encouragement of his wife and daughter, as well as his classmates, he is getting through the program.

“I put in seven days. Four days in the centre for six hours and on Thursdays it is seven hours but at night even more work. If someone takes two hours to do an assignment, it will take me four hours because I don’t type very fast,” Gaston said.

It has been a giant leap for him to embrace education, and for it to be done at a distance. “I find it hard to relate to the teachers and other students when they are not in front of me,” said Gaston. “If I have an issue I send an email, mostly because I can get anxious on the phone, so it works.”

His strategy to reduce his anxiety and stress is to have one person who can answer his questions and if the need arises to help find a solution. He speaks to his Northern College distance education resource person every Friday and the daily contact he has with the Kapuskasing online learning centre staff.

When his anxiety or health issues get stimulated by technology problems, such as losing the class feed for several hours, he knows that someone is working on his behalf to get classes back on track. Also collaborating with fellow classmates, they make use of the downtime to discuss their assignments.

“I want to be out there and I know I just need to get through the education part,” said Gaston. He realizes that although going to school is going to be frustrating at times, stressful and very demanding, it is bringing him a new life.

ERMA FERRELL

ACCPAC ACCOUNTING SOFTWARE
MISSISSAUGAS OF THE NEW
CREDIT FIRST NATION

"I loved the ACCPAC courses because I love working with numbers and it shows in my good marks."



The opportunity to take courses online was ideal for Erma Ferrell. She describes herself as one of the people who started college but never finished because life started happening.

Catching up with her educational goals is never out of sight for her. As a band council member for Mississaugas of the New Credit First Nation, she was in full agreement for Contact North | Contact Nord to set up an online learning centre in their community.

The First Nation community is actually within reasonable driving distance to a number of college and university institutions, however, being able to attend from her community is much easier for her lifestyle.

Located in the library building, she can drive or walk within a few minutes. She was able to get registered and back in school with the help of centre staff.

"I started with the ACE [Academic and Career Entrance] program where we learn about online learning," she explained. "I learned about the different styles of learner, how to get organized, and communication with instructors. It was very helpful. It confirmed that I am a visual and hands on learner."

After taking the preliminary courses, she was ready to sign up for the ACCPAC accounting software courses at Mohawk College.

"I loved the ACCPAC courses because I love working with numbers and it shows in my good marks," she beamed. She has completed three levels and plans to keep going and complete all six.

"Even though I took the ACE program, I needed some help from centre staff with little things. When I signed up and waited for the books to come in and they didn't arrive by the start day I came into the centre in a panic but the staff kept me calm and help me sort out the confusion," she said.

After building her confidence working out of the centre, she got herself set up at home and now enjoys working at her own convenient time. However, she likes knowing that if she needs help someone is available.

When it came to building a relationship with her instructors, it took running into a problem and getting in contact through email.

"Took me a long time to swallow my pride," she said. "I didn't understand what the teacher was asking me to do so I finally emailed her. She wrote back and explained and it was all ok. I had been thinking that the instructor was just there to mark my work."

Getting past some of the early obstacles such as registering for courses, how to communicate with instructors and even how to submit assignments has Erma in a comfortable routine now. She loves taking courses online and has long term goals of finally obtaining her college diploma.

RUTH FLANAGAN

HEALTH RECORDS CLERK

GEORGINA

“I would put the laundry in and then do my studies. In the evening while the kids are doing their homework, I am too.”



For Ruth Flanagan, she knew a good thing when she heard it. As she was driving home one evening she heard the radio advertisement for courses through the Contact North | Contact Nord online learning centre in Sutton. She went home and told her husband she was going back to school. At the time she had closed down her cleaning business due to a permanent physical injury.

“I popped in at the Contact North | Contact Nord centre and explained what I wanted to do,” Ruth said about first learning of distance education. “I sat down with the Contact North | Contact Nord centre coordinator on a Wednesday for a good hour and by Friday I was registered. Once I make up my mind, that’s it I go.”

Ruth registered in the Health Records Clerk certificate program at Loyalist College. She registered for one course at a time. With two young children at home, she did not want to add anymore stress to her life. Distance education gave her the opportunity to go at her own pace.

Ruth had a variety of work experiences since arriving in Canada from Ireland with her husband. She had worked in sales, office administration and five years of running her own cleaning business. When she injured herself, she decided it was an opportunity to get training that would allow her to get a job and stay in the same field. The medical field was the safest and most reliable for finding a job.

Ruth and her family live in Keswick, Ontario, less than a 45 minute drive into Toronto. However, the mother of two young children did not want to attend a day program or commute so having the opportunity to do her coursework in her own community was perfect for her lifestyle.

First she needed to get back into learning and homework mode. “I would go to the Contact North | Contact Nord online learning centre whenever I didn’t like working at home. There were four other women and one man who worked in the centre. It was good to know we were all in the same boat together,” she said.

When her busy family schedule needed her more, she would simply work from home. “I would put the laundry in and then do my studies. In the evening while the kids are doing their homework, I am too.”

Although the certificate program could have been accomplished in just a few months, Ruth took over a year to complete. The material was manageable, the teachers were good at getting back to her quickly - it was simply to fit the courses into her schedule.

Once she had completed her certificate, she sought help with writing her resume and preparing for interviews. Within two weeks after completing her studies, she landed the perfect job.

“I love what I am doing now, working in a doctor’s office. I do everything which is great. It is a small practice. Old fashioned doctors with white coats,” Ruth said about her job.

GUYLAINE GODIN

OFFICE ADMINISTRATION

HAWKESBURY

“They came into where we were doing our course and offered all of us the opportunity for an interview. I got the job!”



It was an opportunity that kept getting better for Guylaine Godin of Hawkesbury. A single mother of two, she decided to seek funding from the Ontario government’s Second Career program to return to school.

“A friend told me about Contact North | Contact Nord,” she admits. “I came in to see what they had to offer.”

Although she had a brief experience with post-secondary education at the University of Ottawa before having her children, she wanted to ease back into a school routine.

Her children required her a bit less so it was a good time to obtain the certificate in Office Administration from La Cité collégiale.

“I was only 19 years old when I attended university. It has been a long time. I am pretty familiar with computers so that part was comfortable,” she said. There were several other women taking the same course and they all worked together at the Contact North | Contact Nord online learning centre in Hawkesbury.

Her course was delivered online and with a textbook, however they had one course held at the Ottawa campus, approximately an hour drive from Hawkesbury.

“It was like having our own class here,” she described. “We had email access to our teachers however it was helpful to bounce ideas off each other and we travelled together for the class in Ottawa.”

The camaraderie and support made a significant difference to her overall experience. The Hawkesbury online learning centre is located in the La Cité collégiale and Guylaine sought out people around the college that could help as well.

There were so many positive features about her studies including being Francophone and taking her studies in French.

She completed most of her homework at the centre since it was challenging to carve out quiet time at home. The supportive environment at the centre, and the friendship with other students, has given her the incentive to consider completing her university degree someday.

Two weeks before graduating from her course, she interviewed for an administrative assistant position at La Cité collégiale.

“They came into where we were doing our course and offered all of us the opportunity for an interview,” she said. “I got the job!”

After working mostly in retail positions, Guylaine is enjoying the new work experience. The certificate required a dedication of six months and well worth her sacrifices, not only with a job but the knowledge that she can complete a college credential with the right support.

CRYSTAL GRAY

BUSINESS ADMINISTRATIVE
ACCOUNTING

FORT FRANCES

“I get up at 5 am, run the dishwasher, throw a load in the washer and sit down to read.”



Everything somehow fell into place for Crystal Gray when she found herself with an opportunity to go back to school and complete a Business Administrative Accounting diploma.

“I always liked numbers,” Crystal admits. “But my parents discouraged me and I didn’t know what else I wanted to be.”

She was older now, married, with kids, and she had access to retraining support. After asking a few people in the field what course she should take to get an accounting job, she went into the Contact North | Contact Nord online learning centre in Fort Frances and registered for the Business Administrative Accounting diploma from Northern College.

She lived 45 kilometres from Fort Frances and would spend the day in the online learning centre. That worked well since she used the time to adjust to attending classes and getting assignments done.

“Some classes are easier if the teacher is in the room but this is the best option for where I live,” said Crystal. Not only did she live in a rural area, her husband was away during the week leaving her with coordinating and scheduling her two sons’, aged 11 and 9, activities. Her oldest is high functioning autistic and required some extra attention. “For my sons it was a big change, but they were willing to help out,” she explained.

It has meant working a lot of late nights, rushing and not doing some housework. “I get up at 5 am, run the dishwasher, throw a load in the washer and sit down to read,” she said.

Eventually the 45 minute commute was eating away precious time and she was able to take all her classes from home on the web-based OntarioLearn.

“Basically I get my text book, read, do my assignments and submit them online,” she explained.

“I learn better when I hear things rather than just reading. I do a lot of talking to myself,” she says with a grin. However it does improve her retention. She did some research and found a program that can read to her.

When teachers and classmates are absent she has found other ways to resource help. “I use YouTube, and I will Google most of my questions,” she said.

Crystal has been committed to the educational requirements for her dream job. She faced difficult health challenges and had to put her education on hold for a year, but diligently returned when she was able.

Achieving her credentials is important to her and will relieve the financial pressure on her husband who has been facing his own health issues. It will also mean that she doesn’t have to take entry level jobs that pay minimum wage.

Once she completes her diploma she will continue to pursue her Certified General Accountant credential, which is also completed at a distance.

RUTH HANEY

DEVELOPMENTAL SERVICE
WORKER

RED LAKE

*“It was a learning process
but I’m comfortable now.
I can understand how
people can get frustrated
and drop out.”*



The main reason Ruth Haney decided to obtain her Developmental Service Worker diploma after six years of working for the Harmony Centre for Community Living was to increase her opportunities for a job promotion.

She knew about the Contact North | Contact Nord online learning centre in Red Lake because her husband had taken courses through the online learning centre. In 2007 she registered with Northern College, and taking her time, completed the diploma over the next four years.

“I could take my time and complete the program in four years rather than attend a campus and complete in two years,” explained Ruth. Due to her work and family commitments, and there was no urgency, it was far easier for her to slowly chip away one course at a time.

Ruth has an odd schedule of shifts, often working overnight. She needed some flexibility. Being able to go into the online learning centre and take the audio classes was great, however she liked the ability to do homework while covering a night shift.

Most of her classmates were located all over the province except for one that lived in Ear Falls, less than an hour drive south of her.

“We became friends during the course and talked on the phone regularly. We met often to do work on assignments together as well. She also did her placement where I work,” said Ruth. Having a fellow student within reasonable driving distance made up for the absence of physical teachers and the feeling of being far away from the majority of students.

She appreciates the support close to home because getting your education at a distance can get frustrating at times whether with the unpredictable technology or no physical teachers present.

“It was a learning process but I’m comfortable now. I can understand how people can get frustrated and drop out,” she explained.

“The Contact North | Contact Nord online learning centre coordinator helped me, my husband helped with any computer problems, and I also made friends with other students working out of the centre,” she said. “It’s a small community and we support each other.”

When it was the teacher who could only help her, she was comfortable giving them a call or contacting them through email.

“I really like learning and I have already signed up for more courses. I have the education bug now!” she admitted.

In her line of work there is always a need to stay current with research and treatment, and she now takes full advantage of distance education.

DEB HEALY

ONTARIO SECONDARY SCHOOL
DIPLOMA

STRATFORD

“I wasn’t sure what I could do when I first started but I feel more confident to do the Pharmacy Technician course now.”



Deb Healy was turning 54 and she decided that if she had another decade to work, she had better like what she was doing.

The FRAM plant that she had worked at for 25 years in Stratford was closing. Her two grown sons were out of the family home, which they moved from the outskirts of Stratford into the town centre.

“I was the first woman in an automotive plant and to take those skills in mechanical and electrical parts to another job, it doesn’t exist around here,” she explained.

Before she left her job, she started to plan for change. “I always wanted to get my Ontario Secondary School Diploma so I worked on an English course while I was still working,” she said.

Then she decided the pharmacy field looked appealing and there seemed to be a demand. To qualify for a Pharmacy Technician program, she would need to get high school math, biology and chemistry. She received the flier advertising the education and training opportunities available at the Contact North | Contact Nord online learning centre in Stratford and discovered a supportive option.

“I had been looking for a way to complete my OSSD online,” she said. “I almost felt like I was too old to do this but my daughter-in-law told me about a 70 year old woman who was going to university with her.”

Hearing about others in school had an impact on her motivation, in addition to her family having a history of Alzheimer’s, she wanted to keep her mind active to ward off the disease.

When Deb took her first class in math with Quinte Adult Education she received 94%. She was home alone and could devote several hours of concentrated attention. There was minimal contact with teachers but she would watch a lot of teachers on YouTube. “They explain from start to finish,” she explained. “Each module offered online resources that could be used in the lesson.”

“I wasn’t sure what I could do when I first started but I feel more confident to do the Pharmacy Technician course now,” she said.

She has found distance education, particularly online classes, a great way to learn and believes more people should be participating. Many of her coworkers who were let go from the plant found jobs in other factories, however for Deb she saw an opportunity to pursue a career she missed out on because of family obligations.

“I had some goals I wanted to achieve, get my OSSD, get my motorcycle license and now I would like to work in a pharmacy,” Deb admitted.

With her husband only a few years away from retirement, she will have the flexibility with her new skills to move to a different city if they wanted. A whole new lifestyle is unfolding for her from simply taking the first step with getting the education that opens doors.

KRIS JAQUES

LITERACY AND BASIC SKILLS
WINDSOR

"I have taken close to 50 courses in the past year. I don't have a favourite, but it is fun to learn different things."



Preparing to find a new job can often lead to unexpected opportunities. For Kris Jaques he discovered the fun and benefits of online learning when his job developer sent him over to the Contact North | Contact Nord online learning centre in Windsor.

It turned out to be a great suggestion because it introduced him to the Sioux Hudson Literacy Council online courses. After taking a number of courses, he was able to add to his skill level but also opened up a whole new world of education he finds entertaining.

"I have taken close to 50 courses in the past year. I don't have a favourite, but it is fun to learn different things," he said.

The Windsor centre has a number of students who take advantage of the free online courses offered by Sioux Hudson Literacy Council and the Learning Hub.

Kris is 27 years old, has cerebral palsy and is enjoying the freedom of living on his own now with a very full and busy life.

He worked for Napa Auto Parts for seven years before getting laid off. Without letting his loss bring him down, he remained positive by taking online courses. With a boost to his resume and his esteem, he found a job as the donor greeter for Goodwill Industries.

"I never did online learning before but these programs have made it really easy for me to go at my own speed," said Kris.

Kris has been recognized in his community for not letting the barriers get in his way and taking these courses have helped him to build his confidence to get out there and do things.

The courses through Sioux Hudson Literacy Council are audio-based which fits with Kris's learning style. With his headset and computer, he is able to join in with students from around the province.

His major challenge is being able to type fast enough. In those situations, he calls over some help from one of the Contact North | Contact Nord online learning centre employees. He has also found the course teachers to be very supportive and will offer extra help during breaks.

"Compared to my medical challenges, juggling my personal support and working, taking online courses is a cake walk," said Kris. In fact, after a busy day, he finds doing the courses relaxing.

Going into the Contact North | Contact Nord online learning centre, which is a four minute ride from his house, is a place he meets with others who enjoy learning. "They bring something to the conversation and maybe even explain better," said Kris. He may be in Windsor but he gets to have interesting conversations with other students all over the province.

"I have learned a few things to help me at work. I don't need to stress about it now, like making a spreadsheet," explained Kris. He plans on using more of the skills he has gained for his job, particularly with a new special project to open a bookstore. It has also given him the idea of possibly doing a college diploma someday.

KIM JOHNSTON

LAW CLERK

SOUTH PORCUPINE

"I finished with a grade point average of 3.8 last year after learning how to use the tools for my learning disability."



When Kim Johnston was finally diagnosed with a learning disability, it turned out that her choice to study at a distance through Contact North | Contact Nord online learning centre in South Porcupine was ideal for her.

"If you put me in a class of 20 people, it is far too distracting," she explained. The tests for diagnosing a learning disability determined that her primary learning method is audio.

She found out she had a learning disability when she was having trouble writing tests. "I would blank out and have incredible anxiety," she said. "I never wanted to ask for help, thought I could figure out on my own but once I did the assessments, and determined that I did have a learning disability, I could get a lot of help."

Her biggest asset was in fact being a distance education student and class delivery was audio. "Having material beforehand is key for me. I need all the PowerPoint handouts before me and I need silence because I am listening to pick up everything."

Not only are classes delivered in audio but recorded allowing Kim to play back the class session if she missed something important. She is also able to participate from home and was able to continue attending classes when she went to Nova Scotia to visit family.

"I finished with a grade point average of 3.8 last year after learning how to use the tools for my learning disability," she reported.

She uses Kurzweil software that turns text to speech. She has a tutor who checks her work and provides suggestions for what she might not have heard. She also has her tests read out loud to her.

Aside from the tools that help the learning process, she has learned a great deal from her classmates. "There are six other girls in the class with me. We have good discussions, and one of them showed me how to get and stay organized," she said.

However the majority of her class time is participating in an area where she can be alone in the centre because she needs the silence to put all her attention to listening.

"I am a people person and need the interaction but when it comes to learning I need complete silence because I need to hear everything," Kim said.

Being able to pursue the Law Clerk program at Northern College is somewhat of a dream for Kim. When she was in high school, she wanted to become a lawyer, however she became discouraged when teachers labelled her temperamental. Her first job was at MacDonald's which eventually lead to fifteen years of working in the food services industry.

When she was laid off from her last restaurant job, she decided to take the opportunity that was offered through the Ontario Government's Second Career program to go to school.

Now that she has found the tools for successful learning, she would like to continue pursuing her dream and take the paralegal course.

GWEN KURZ

COMMUNITY AND ECONOMIC
SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT DIPLOMA
DRYDEN

“It was just me alone in a classroom with a video screen, it was rather terrifying. Luckily the professors were good at teaching at a distance. They worked at engaging us.”



There are times in our lives we need to boldly move in the direction of opportunity.

In 2007, Gwen Kurz seized the opportunity to grow her career and pursue a business diploma through distance education.

With two daughters settled into elementary school, serving part-time on the Dryden municipal council and working in the Kenora MP's office, she clearly saw an opportunity to pursue a dream. Maybe it was turning 40, or getting the Contact North | Contact Nord flyer, that nudged her enough to take that first course.

“It was just me alone in a classroom with a video screen, it was rather terrifying,” admits Gwen when she showed up for her first class. “Luckily the professors were good at teaching at a distance. They worked at engaging us.”

This was a whole new learning style for Gwen. Last time she was in a classroom was over 15 years ago when she took a culinary arts course. Taking the business management certificate with Northern College required her to communicate and collaborate without ever meeting her professors or class mates. A new skill she found daunting but achievable. She used e-mail, and when necessary, called professors and classmates on the telephone to collaborate.

Gwen is grateful for the opportunity to remain in her community. With her daughters attending elementary school, and her husband working as the Fire Chief, it was not possible for her to move away to attend school. The flexibility of attending distance and online courses allowed her to not only be home with her family but continue part-time as a City Councillor.

“It was in the second semester of the business course that I realized how much I enjoyed being a student. I came across the Community and Economic Social Development Worker diploma and decided that was the direction I wanted to pursue. The courses overlapped, it would only be an additional 18 months to put that under my belt,” recalls Gwen.

What would be a normal assignment, working in a group, is slightly different in distance education. In her second year, she was assigned to work in a group to write a business plan. The group consisted of seven students living in different communities across the north. “We had to organize ourselves through email and the Centra [web conferencing] system. It can be challenging but you grow accustomed to that form of communication,” she reflected. Gwen and her classmates used the Internet, e-mail and Contact North | Contact Nord's Centra web conferencing program to discuss ideas and edit written material.

Gwen graduated in 2011 and attended the Northern College ceremony in Kirkland Lake to accept her diploma. Her family drove over 1,200 kilometres, a 16 hour drive, for her to walk across the stage and accept her diploma. She also accepted the Governor General's Collegiate Bronze Medal for graduating with the highest average of the graduating class.

Although it was a long drive, it was worth every kilometre to be acknowledged for her hard work and finally put a face to a voice.

Gwen has recently taken on the position of manager for the Dryden Chamber of Commerce where she can apply her enhanced communication skills and improved business knowledge.

KRISTEN LEDREW

BACHELOR OF ARTS

PARRY SOUND

“I was worried about losing the connection you make with professors when you are in a classroom. That connection is important for post graduate studies.”



When Kristen Ledrew discovered it was possible to complete her Bachelor of Arts degree online, that made all the pieces in her life fit together.

Kristen lives in Parry Sound, a community of 60,000 in the summer and 18,000 during all the other seasons. She grew up in Parry Sound and after high school headed south to Sheridan College for a three year media arts diploma.

However, between high school and college, she was diagnosed with Crohn’s disease. She decided that managing this disease was not going to hamper her life and she found ways to complete her studies.

After obtaining her diploma, there were not many jobs for her and with expensive prescriptions, she decided to pursue an undergraduate degree at Trent University in Peterborough. She completed two years when a job opportunity came up in Parry Sound. She returned home and began seeking ways to complete her degree while working full time.

“It took me a long time to find the right solution especially since I was doing it on my own. Then I was talking with a colleague and she told me to check out Contact North | Contact Nord,” she explained.

“I had known about the Contact North | Contact Nord online learning centre in Parry Sound but thought it was only college programs. So I called the centre and was registered at Lakehead University in the next semester!”

The Centre staff connected her with the accessibility office at Lakehead University to continue support during her educational career.

Kristen said the courses were offered in a few different ways. One class involved video Skype lectures that were also recorded. She would download the lecture and PowerPoint notes, which she downloaded at the Contact North | Contact Nord online learning centre, and review at home.

She participated in a discussion board in which several questions would be presented and students would be required to answer and pose new ones.

“A really interesting format was when the professor asked everyone to sign in to the discussion board and then we would be divided into four groups. Each group had a chat room with five of us to work on a project for the next hour,” she said.

She built friendships with her classmates through these projects and didn’t feel as if she was missing out on the social aspect of learning.

Another feature of a large university is the library resources. Kristen was able to access the Lakehead University library online in addition to other libraries.

She uses an e-reader and downloads a PDF version of an article or chapter from the library, she simply downloads onto her e-reader. She is able to highlight text and make comments on her e-reader.

“I was worried about losing the connection you make with professors when you are in a classroom. That connection is important for post-secondary studies,” she said. “But I find that I am far more connected to my professors online then when I was in class. I will reach out more through email and we are communicating on a regular basis.”

With managing her health, her full-time job and school she makes sure she is extremely organized and stays on top of her studies.

DAN LOGAN

LITERACY AND BASIC SKILLS

WINDSOR

“You can get to know people even without seeing them or being close to them.”



Dan Logan would now describe himself as well-rounded and more thoughtful. After taking a number of Good Learning Anywhere courses offered by the Sioux Hudson Literacy Council, he has a new perspective of himself.

He admits that he was a bit nervous and shy when he started taking the courses at the Contact North | Contact Nord online learning centre in Windsor. Retired before he was sixty due to health reasons, he wanted to add some structure to his day. He worked at Chrysler for thirteen years, as well as the Ford Motor Company. Although pleased to be retired, he left a daily routine that provided meaning and structure to his life. With his daughters' recommendation, he started taking the Good Learning Anywhere courses.

“My initial feeling was that it was something to do. It was different. You wear headphones and speak with people all over the province. I have taken about 50 courses in just over a year. A lot of self interest courses, self esteem, self management, creative writing and sharing circles,” Dan described.

“Took some time to learn how the computer operates but the staff help me navigate. In the first few months I was too shy to ask questions, I would just listen. There is an icon for putting your hand up and nobody is talking over someone else. Now, I love learning online. I am less nervous about participating because they don't see me.”

The centre is conveniently located for him and offers the latest technology with immediate help, should there be any problems.

In fact, Dan took some time off from taking the courses during the summer months but found that he actually missed learning and meeting new people.

“You can get to know people even without seeing them or being close to them,” he said. His passion for learning only increased and he took more computer courses and more courses about First Nations culture.

He received the student of the month award and was also asked to assist one of the instructors to develop a course on volunteering. His task was to provide feedback on the course slides.

His involvement also includes working with a mentor who helps with goal setting and choosing courses.

Dan lives alone and appreciates the expanding circle of people in his life now. The overall learning experience has been exciting and rewarding. He actually considers being able to participate in the Good Learning Anywhere courses as a treat. With a limited income and a lot of spare time, learning online is a great way to remain active and involved.

It has crossed his mind that he might be ready to take some university courses through the online learning centre, a much less daunting endeavour online and with his new comfort with distance education.

JENNIFER MARTEL

COMMUNITY ECONOMIC AND
SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT WORKER
SOUTH PORCUPINE

“It was such a relief to get the diploma done. It wasn’t hard, just time consuming. If your focus is education rather than social, and you have a strong work ethic, this is the best.”



Jennifer Martel had been told about the Ontario Government’s Second Career program and thought she might have a better chance of finding work with a practical college diploma.

After working in Sudbury for eight years, she joined her sister in Timmins to work in a diamond lab. She enjoyed the work; it was different, and interesting. However they laid her off after 18 months, and she learned that she was pregnant.

When she was researching courses that could be taken with the Government of Ontario’s Second Career funding, she found the Community Economic and Social Development Worker diploma from Northern College.

“I decided on the diploma not knowing where it was located, just that it was very comprehensive,” she said.

Turned out it was offered through the Contact North | Contact Nord online learning centre in South Porcupine.

By the time she started classes, her son was six weeks old. Initially the college had an onsite daycare and Jennifer was able to drop off her son, attend her class and pop into the daycare during breaks. Unfortunately, the daycare closed the summer between her first and second year.

When it was challenging finding appropriate daycare, she greatly appreciated being able to participate in the audio classes from home.

She had a combination of video and audio classes and preferred the audio because she could playback the class when she found a topic confusing.

“I have a great memory. I remember conversations, so it worked for me,” she said.

Being the only one in the classroom also worked well for her because it eliminated the distraction of other conversations going on in the room. Her focus was on doing well in her courses and caring for her infant son.

“I was the only one taking the course at the online learning centre. I had a quiet space and took all my courses from there,” she described.

The assignments involved a number of group projects and she would meet classmates using the Centra [web conferencing] software where they could text chat and hear each other. They also used Centra to make class presentations which she found easy and comfortable.

“It was such a relief to get the diploma done,” she said. “It wasn’t hard, just time consuming. If your focus is education rather than social, and you have a strong work ethic, this is the best.”

She had already been to Laurentian University in Sudbury for classical studies however did not complete the last few courses.

Jennifer is pleased with her decision not only for the diploma she chose, but to study at a distance. After graduating in 2011, she was offered a job at the March of Dimes in Timmins and was promoted before completing her first anniversary. Her position fits very well with her own experience and what she learned in the Community Economic and Social Development course. She works with people who experience barriers to employment, from physical to needing childcare.

Having had such a positive experience with distance education, she has started looking at finishing her incomplete university degree from Laurentian University.

ANAAM MATTI

LITERACY AND BASIC SKILLS

WINDSOR

"I never used to take these online courses. I am visual and like to see people face to face. I was not used to just hearing the teacher and students, but now it is ok."



While Anaam Matti has been unemployed, she has taken full advantage of the Sioux Hudson Literacy Council and The LearningHUB literacy and basic skills courses available through the Contact North | Contact Nord online learning centre in Windsor.

Anaam was born in Iraq however lived in the United States, New Brunswick and Alberta before settling in Windsor. Her English is not as good as she would like and she has not worked in Canada. When she faced single parenting, it was time to seek employment to help support herself and two children.

"I was trying to work before, but I don't have experience in Canada. Back home I worked as an accountant," she explained.

In order to prepare for working in Canada, she has taken over 20 courses. Each course takes only a few hours and provides useful information on topics such as Microsoft Office, spelling and punctuation, and budgeting.

"I never used to take these online courses. I am visual and like to see people face to face. I was not used to just hearing the teacher and students, but now it is ok," she said.

She had attempted to participate in the courses from home but she found housework and kids too distracting. Coming into the online learning centre is more productive.

While her children are in school, she enjoys coming into the online learning centre and participating in a course.

With two growing kids at home, who are learning in unfamiliar ways to her, she was unable to help her kids with their homework. Through The LearningHUB, she was able to take an algebra course and spelling course to learn what they were being taught in school.

She has taken courses on improving self esteem that she passes on to her preteen daughter. What she learns in the courses is not limited to the teacher but what the other Canadian students share as well.

"These courses help me have better self esteem, and it is fun," she said. "I have a lot of challenges in my life right now but at least I am busy improving myself."

And when she does have more time, she wants to pursue additional education. It has been hard with her limited English skills but her vocabulary is increasing all the time. "I have my dictionary with me all the time," she boasts.

After a stressful few years, Anaam is looking forward to turning a corner and applying all the new knowledge she has gained. She is well equipped to make positive changes in her life.

TARA MCINTYRE

MEDICAL OFFICE ADMINISTRATION
AND TRANSCRIPTION

PORT HOPE

“I met with the Coordinator at the Port Hope centre and we quickly identified Loyalist College’s program as the best fit for me.”



It has been a smooth process from the start. That has been Tara McIntyre’s experience with working to complete her certificate in Medical Office Administration and Transcription through Loyalist College’s eLab.

While the college is located in Belleville, Tara is able to access her course work and support from the Contact North | Contact Nord online learning centre in Port Hope without having to drive the 80 km to the campus.

Already a well-organized wife and mother of two pre-teens, Tara manages to get her homework done before the due date. When she was laid off from her call centre job, she did not miss a beat to get the training that would land her a better job.

Tara saw the need for office administrators in the medical field and headed straight in that direction. With the help of an employment counsellor at Watton Employment Services, she was led to the Port Hope centre.

“I met with the Coordinator at the Port Hope centre and we quickly identified Loyalist College’s program as the best fit for me,” said Tara about the ease of getting registered.

“Being in school all summer has been the biggest challenge. My teenagers are at home while I am at the centre doing my studies,” said Tara. Her husband has had to jump in and be available for the kids when she is not home. The positive side is that they are witness to their mother’s work ethic when it comes to schoolwork.

What Tara loves, as a self-motivated and organized person, is the aspect of self-directed study which allows her to work at her own pace. “I am actually three weeks ahead,” she said about the new semester she is entering. “I am working on my third medical terminology assignment not due for another three weeks. I will have it done and submitted by the end of the day.”

Although having to find babysitters for her kids, Tara has found the best way to stay on top of her studies is to work at the Port Hope centre. She approaches her studies like a full-time job.

Tara’s biggest challenge, she says, is facing the exams. “I am stressed about the exam. It is three hours long and closed book. It is a lot of information,” she explained. That is the part of returning to school that she feels overwhelmed with, but with her determination and good study habits, she can expect to find success.

Tara is hopeful about her new career choice and is confident about landing a job when she completes the program. “One of the electives I chose was dental terminology which opens up my options even further.

I can work in any department in the hospital, or in a doctor’s or dental office,” said Tara.

Tara has turned what could have been a devastating blow financially for her family into a promising opportunity and a positive example of perseverance for her children. She has found success, so far, by approaching her studies as if they were a full-time job with no excuses for procrastination or not showing up for work.

JOHN MENZIES

LIBERAL ARTS DEGREE

HALIBURTON

“Online courses work for me, they fit my personality. However, it’s the computer that is tricky for me. I am not very tech savvy.”



The time had arrived for John Menzies to pursue one of the biggest challenges of his life.

He had always dreamt of getting a university degree, but life always seemed to put something in the way. Once passing the milestone of 65 years of age, it was the perfect time.

John spent his career as a taxi driver on the streets of Toronto. He was only 17 years old when he started driving and by 21, he took ownership of his taxi.

Now living in the Haliburton area, John enjoys playing the piano in two groups as well as playing solo for his church, volunteering and taking university courses.

“I knew in my 40s that I didn’t have time to go back to school and I had heard the stories of people in their 70s accomplishing their dream of a university degree, so at 65, I decided it was time,” said John.

John started with a course in German culture from the University of Waterloo. Getting acquainted with the computer and distance education was the first order of business. With the help of the Contact North |

Contact Nord online learning centre in Haliburton, he was registered, online and working through the first course.

John would have the Centre Coordinator demonstrate how to use the program with him and then try it himself before feeling comfortable to work from home.

“The course was laid out very nicely for me. They gave you a topic and tasks to complete and the final exam was done the same way,” explained John.

“Online courses work for me, they fit my personality,” he described the new experience. “However, it’s the computer that is tricky for me. I am not very tech savvy.”

When he encounters a ‘technical’ challenge, John gets himself to the local computer shop. From downloading a program, to learning about using software programs, he gets the help he needs to keep going.

Not like twenty-somethings who take to the smartphone culture very easily, John and other older learners must get comfortable with lectures on video as well as e-mail conversations with professors. John says he sometimes feels like his arms need to be stretched from here to Waterloo. For the most part, the people at the other end, and close to home, are helpful.

He had to take a small break at one point because of health problems. However, with the understanding of his professor, John took care of his health and then returned to his studies.

His third course involved listening to a video lecture, which he found straight forward, but had to learn another new skill, taking notes. John had to slow down his process and sometimes listen to the lecture a few times to make sure he captured what he needed in order to complete his assignment.

“I have seventeen more courses to complete my degree, but I am not in any hurry,” said John.

Despite every challenge this new experience brings his way, from becoming comfortable with computers, taking notes from a video lecture and writing exams, John never gives up on his dream of a university degree.

MELANIE MIDDLEBROOK

BOOKKEEPING CERTIFICATE

BRACEBRIDGE

"I didn't give up throughout the paperwork process. I knew it was something I really wanted to do."



Is it real if it's online?

Melanie Middlebrook had that very thought when she started her bookkeeping certificate from St. Lawrence College. Without the instructor at the front of a classroom, it all felt unreal.

Once she submitted her first assignment and it came back with a mark and comments, it began to feel more like school.

"The course was really good," said Melanie. "But it is much harder than going to a classroom because you need to be more self-directed. Many people think it is easier to do a course online, but it can be challenging to feel connected. When I needed an answer to a question, it could take time and it is sometimes difficult to explain your question in an e-mail."

Melanie lives in Bracebridge, Ontario and this was the best option for her to remain in her community and get the credential she wanted.

She had worked in the same company for twenty years when they started downsizing. She saw it as an opportunity to make a change, so she took their package and left. Once unemployed and looking at her options, Melanie heard about the Ontario Second Career program and the opportunity to take an online distance course.

"I didn't give up throughout the paperwork process. I knew it was something I really wanted to do," said Melanie about the arduous task of funding and college applications.

Her goal was to meet the deadline for registration and it became her number one priority, requiring many hours on the telephone and filling out forms, until she received the letter saying she was registered.

After meeting that first challenge of getting into the program, then came the actual course work. "I had a small case of 'what the heck am I doing' that first week. It was very overwhelming, from downloading the software programs, getting online and reading, lots of reading," said Melanie.

Like any course, when she felt disconnected from her professor or other students, she sought out resources in her own community. When she had a question about bookkeeping practices, she found a local bookkeeper and when she had computer problems, she found a helpful computer shop.

Often, distance education students are not able to attend the graduation ceremony. However, for Melanie, she took the opportunity to drive to the college and attend her ceremony.

"It was no different just because I studied on line. I was able to wear my gown and meet the professors and administrators in person at last. Put some faces to the e-mails," explained Melanie.

"If I do another course, and I am looking for one now, I will choose a live course," she said. "After I became comfortable with distance education, I really like learning this way and see lots of courses I want to take now."

Getting comfortable for Melanie was finding that she could find the right words for an e-mail, or doing her exam in a room alone with a proctor close by and feeling confident to seek resources in her own community to help her.

KAREN MORTON

ADDICTION CAREWORKER

ORLÉANS

“McMaster University has a system where they connect you with everyone doing the course worldwide. I have made a connection with a classmate in Spain. We share information about research mostly.”



Perusing the job board in her new community lead Karen Morton to an educational opportunity she had never expected.

“We are a military family and lived in British Columbia. My husband just retired and we moved to Ottawa,” she explained. “When we moved to Ottawa I was wondering what I was going to do. I came to the employment centre to look at the job board and was referred to the Contact North | Contact Nord online learning centre in Orléans.”

After looking through the catalogue she found an interesting course, Addiction Careworker diploma offered by McMaster University. As she had already spent close to twenty years working in social services, this diploma would add to her work experience.

“I really enjoy the program. There are 24 units to complete and I only do one at a time. I am not giving myself a time limit,” she said.

She admits that when her husband retired it was a big change for her, including the move across the country and her children no longer living at home with them. She has the luxury of not needing to work, however she loves to work.

“McMaster University has a system where they connect you with everyone doing the course worldwide. I have made a connection with a classmate in Spain. We share information about research mostly,” she explained.

She doesn’t mind that she works alone with limited teacher contact. She gets to her home office by 9:30 am every morning and has a plan for her day to keep her focused.

“I could see myself getting distracted by others in the classroom,” she admits. “I am close to 50 years old and just want to focus. I don’t need all the extras.”

One extra she does appreciate though is the McMaster library online. She is amused by not ever being to the campus in Hamilton but having access to such a great and extensive library, all through her computer.

There is a lot of reading and research in the courses, which she likes. Her family and friends provide discussion on her assignments. The teacher-student contact is very minimal mostly a mark and some brief comments.

She is comfortable with the course structure and material as this is her third diploma. Her previous diplomas, one in Accounting and the other in Community Support Worker, were taken early in her career but still good training for her studies now.

It is new however to come into the Contact North | Contact Nord online learning centre to write her exams. It is nice to know that support is there if she needs it, however she is productive working from home.

Karen is content working away at her courses, one at a time. “Not sure where it is going to take me, I may finish and work somewhere completely different,” she said. Just knowing that it is interesting and beneficial in many ways is good enough for her right now.

GINA NIKOLIC

RECREATION THERAPY

DRYDEN

“One of the good things about this course being at a distance is that if I decided to move, I can still continue my course.”



After high school, Gina Nikolic left Dryden and headed south to Windsor to take a program in sign language at St. Clair College. She had an interest in languages and wanted to try something a little different, and knew there was work in the southern Ontario schools, just not in Dryden.

After completing school and working in southern Ontario for many years, she came back to the North to be close to her family.

“I found work in front line social services but not exactly what I wanted to do. When I received the flyer from Contact North | Contact Nord, I decided to go into the centre and talk to the coordinator,” she recalled.

She wanted to find a way to pull together all her experiences and see where that would take her.

The Recreation Therapy diploma from Canadore College in North Bay seemed to offer the opportunity to do just that.

“It was perfect. I had many different avenues I could take from it – could work in long term care, mental health, children, corrections or even sports and recreation,” said Gina.

After living in southern Ontario where her options were plenty, it was a pleasant surprise to find such a perfect fit and be able to study from home.

“It is very convenient and easy, other than having a computer problem one time, which I solved by going into the centre, I work from home,” Gina admitted.

Being the only one in her class from Dryden she does find working alone sometimes challenging especially as she is required to find and negotiate her own placement. However, she has made a few friends with other students during text chats and appreciates the diversity of students.

For all the reasons she finds distance education difficult, there are just as many reasons it works better than on-campus learning.

“One of the good things about this course being at a distance is that if I decided to move, I can still continue my course,” said Gina

She is keeping an eye open for jobs in her field and with her previous experience she could take on a new job opportunity and continue with her education.

Being able to playback classes at home and have so much flexibility has changed her perspective about education. She does admit that she would prefer to see the teacher and classmates to feel more like a ‘class’, however she believes this is the way of the future. There are opportunities to meet and connect with teachers and classmates over the internet. Some students who attend industry conferences will meet and form friendships. If she does not meet them throughout the course, she has plans to take the long trip to attend her graduation and finally meet face to face.

Gina beams confidence, “This was the right choice and things will work out.”

KATHY OLLIS

NATIVE CHILD AND FAMILY
SERVICE WORKER

DRYDEN

*"I feel like a better person
from going to school.
Getting my own identity
especially after my life
collapsed."*



When tragedy struck Kathy Ollis's family, the chance to attend college offered the healing and motivation to restore some sanity. In April 2009, her husband suddenly died and there was no money. "Life changed right there, no time for nothing, had to get on with my life," Kathy reflected.

She had been a stay at home mom while her husband was a long haul trucker. With only a grade 12 diploma, some basic bookkeeping skills, and her last work experience, sewing at a local sheep farm, she wouldn't be able to support herself and two daughters.

While working at the sheep farm, she injured herself and had to stop working and collect disability benefits. On top of all this misfortune and grief, she had a serious car accident.

Life was pushing her to make a change and take care of herself. She had two daughters and one still at home completing high school.

Six months after her husband's death, she started the Native Child and Family Service Worker diploma from Confederation College.

Going away to attend school was not an option. She had known about the Contact North | Contact Nord online learning centre in Dryden and was grateful that she could take the course she wanted without leaving the support around her and uprooting her daughter.

Aside from classes and homework, she had numerous doctors' appointments in Winnipeg and Thunder Bay. "I still managed to do my schooling, not sure how I did it!" she exclaimed.

Her injuries limited her ability to type but she had learned to reach out for support. "I wouldn't give up and they wouldn't allow me to give up," she said about her classmates and family.

Ollis is a 'people person' and needed to compensate the absence of a teacher in the classroom with her classmates. There were five students who attended classes with her in Dryden, and they offered support and encouragement to each other.

The teachers were from all over the province, however one would teach out of the Dryden classroom on occasion which Ollis liked, getting an understanding of how distance education worked from different sides.

The hardest class she took was learning Ojibway. "Learning a language at a distance is hard to do, all you can do is hear them. I wanted to watch someone speak it," she said. "I am also a visual person so I often wished there was a teacher in the class."

Ollis had been through so much and she knew how to make the best of her situation. "I feel like a better person from going to school. Getting my own identity especially after my life collapsed."

What feels the best for her after such a stressful time is that her daughters are proud of her accomplishment and personal growth.

KASIA OXLEY

EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATOR
DIPLOMA AND BACHELOR OF
SOCIAL WORK
PARRY SOUND

"I come from a background in Poland that you work hard and strive to accomplish, that helps me to work and study at the same time."



Kasia Oxley, a Polish immigrant, knew that when she settled in Parry Sound with her Canadian husband she still wanted to feed her appetite for learning.

She arrived in Canada with a teacher's degree however she wanted to work with children in the mental health field. She was able to secure a job in a daycare.

"When I started working at the daycare centre, they told me about taking the Early Childhood Education diploma so I could keep a job," she explained.

By taking the Northern College diploma through distance education at the Contact North | Contact Nord online learning centre in Parry Sound, she was able to continue working while obtaining the credential.

English is a second language to Kasia and although she became fluent when she was in Poland, it still added a challenge to taking all her courses in English.

"I found what I was learning was easy, but it was time consuming," she said. "I did like going into the centre to take my classes though, they were mostly audio classes."

Because she was already working in the field, she found her supervisor and colleagues to be supportive if she needed any help with the material.

"I come from a background in Poland that you work hard and strive to accomplish, that helps me to work and study at the same time," she explained.

Kasia graduated with her ECE diploma in 2009 and decided she wanted to continue her studies and obtain a social work degree.

She was able to use the support of Contact North | Contact Nord online learning centre staff to register, and to know there was encouragement and a place to study if needed.

She registered in the University of Waterloo Social Work program which allowed her to take some courses through correspondence and others she would have to attend on-campus. No longer a teacher lecturing or other students to connect to, she needed to call on her inner discipline.

"For this kind of learning, through correspondence, I needed good self care and a strict routine to get my work done. But I love learning and being able to work and go to school. It was a very enriching experience for me," she said.

Her long term plan is to possibly move to the Yukon where the need for social workers is in demand. She is excited about all the possibilities not only for learning in Canada but for her work opportunities as well.

GORD POLLARD

PARAMEDIC DIPLOMA

DRYDEN

“I had great instructors, some that I will never forget and a big reason why I remained in this area to do my diploma.”



When Gord Pollard decided to take the Paramedic Diploma through Confederation College’s Dryden campus and the Contact North | Contact Nord online learning centre in Dryden, he was good and ready.

He had returned home after several years of travelling across Canada. After completing his high school diploma, he wanted to know what was beyond north western Ontario.

Gord could have stopped at any point on his travels to study or settle into a career, yet he came back home. His passion for health care had been ignited when he volunteered with First Response and had a dream of becoming a paramedic.

“To go to school in my home town and potentially work and give back is what motivated me,” says Gord.

He started with the pre-health course that would get him back up to speed in high school English, Chemistry, and Biology, and prepare him for the intensity of the two year paramedic studies.

“I had great instructors, some that I will never forget and a big reason why I remained in this area to do my diploma. I could have gone to Thunder Bay or Kenora and live on my own but I would much rather be here.”

In fact, Gord lives in Eagle River, a community of 1,000 people that is 30 km outside of Dryden. Being able to live with his family and drive into the campus is greatly appreciated.

Distance education is familiar to the Pollards. His sister completed the Personal Support Worker program the year before. “She encouraged me but just knowing she did it made it easier for me to decide.”

The downside of technology is that it can go down during a class and students wait without any guarantee of it returning. For Gord, he finds the patience to wait for it to be restored.

“There is a sense of responsibility to wait for the teacher to come back on line,” said Gord. And he is not alone waiting. He and his classmates will continue to discuss their course or get to know each other better.

“Everyone in our class knows the challenges we have ahead of us. We know how hard it is and we are in it together,” says Gord.

Because it is a health related course, they become very comfortable with each other. Some of their classes require them to check each other’s pulse and temperature, practice their CPR skills and this leads to a stronger bonding and friendship.

Gord is a very serious student who is not deterred by the challenges of distance education. The balance in this course is his second year will put him on placement with the in-class portion done and behind him.

When he is talking to prospective students he tells them, if they have an opportunity to get an education, it is never a bad choice and it can take you as far as you want to go.

SAMANTHA QUEVILLON

SOCIAL SERVICES WORKER
IROQUOIS FALLS

“I was going to travel to Timmins everyday but then learned about the Contact North | Contact Nord online learning centre in Iroquois Falls. I didn’t even need to drive. I just walked over to my old high school where the centre is located.”



Leaving home to head off to school can be a challenging milestone in a young person’s life. For Iroquois Falls student, Samantha Quevillon, who went off to school in North Bay, moved back home after her first year.

The school was great, but the costs were high. Not yet 21 years old, she really appreciates the chance to stay in her own community. She lives at home, works at the local Tim Horton’s, and takes her classes at the Contact North | Contact Nord online learning centre in Iroquois Falls.

Northern College in Timmins, only an hour’s drive from Iroquois Falls, had the same program she was taking.

“I was going to travel to Timmins everyday but then learned about the Contact North | Contact Nord online learning centre in Iroquois Falls,” she said about discovering distance education. “I didn’t even need to drive. I just walked over to my old high school where the centre is located.”

Samantha compares being on campus and learning at a distance as both good. Studying at a distance is just a different way of learning.

“I find the only challenge is that I am used to seeing the teacher in front of me, but I like it when the teachers use the webcam and more are learning how to use the webcam,” she explained.

She finds most of her teachers are good about appreciating and understanding the challenge of distance education, which helps. She is comfortable with communicating through email and, when necessary, they set up a phone call.

After being in a busy campus she enjoys being the only student for her classes at the Contact North | Contact Nord online learning centre. “I don’t have to share a microphone with anyone,” she says with a grin. “It’s just easier and no distractions.”

Although she is alone for some of her classes, she works on projects with other students around the province. They have also formed study groups where they meet online.

“A couple of students will be appointed leader of the group and then we share notes,” she explained. “It doesn’t matter that we are not sitting in front of each other.”

Like many other online classes, her classmates have created a Facebook page or talk over Skype.

A unique component of her program includes students meeting at one of the Northern College campuses for lab classes several times.

“There were four different places we could choose from. I went to Timmins and we practiced counselling skills which works a lot better face to face,” she said.

Samantha has been able to create her own perfect education plan. Once she completes the course work in the spring of 2013 her placement will begin. At that time, she will be more prepared to venture away from home, maybe Timmins or Ottawa.

STEPHANIE REID

MEDICAL ADMINISTRATION
MADOC

"It's a big deal for me to get this diploma. My mother never even graduated from high school, but I have an aunt who did and works in a nursing home now and she is really supportive."



It took every ounce of discipline Stephanie Reid had in order to stay focused on her schoolwork to complete the Medical Administration diploma from Loyalist College through online learning.

All of her courses were delivered online, with a text book, and only email contact with the teachers. Her preference was to obtain her diploma at a distance because it meant she didn't have to travel everyday and she was not comfortable in large groups.

Her decision to return to school came after a back injury that forced her to look into alternative work that would accommodate her injury. While recuperating, she became intrigued with working in the medical field.

"I started noticing staff in the doctor's office and thought I might like to work in the medical field," she explained. "I went and talked to a few people at the hospital to find out what kind of training I needed and then sat down with the coordinator at the Contact North | Contact Nord online learning centre in Madoc."

Although Madoc is only a 20 minute drive from Belleville and the Loyalist College campus, she was grateful that she had the option of learning without added stress of travel and large groups.

In fact, the Madoc online learning centre is in her old high school. Only a few years after her high school graduation, she is comfortable with the routine and occasionally bumping into her high school teachers.

What she liked about the Medical Administration diploma was that she had a number of options to choose from when she finished. She could work in a hospital, dentist office or even veterinarian practice.

"I am really trying to do something with my life," said the single mom of a four year old daughter. "It's a big deal for me to get this diploma. My mother never even graduated from high school, but I have an aunt who did and works in a nursing home now and she is really supportive."

Stephanie lives with her parents who support her in many ways. As for getting her schoolwork done she was encouraged by other students studying at the online learning centre as well.

"I went into the centre every day. I would start my day at 9:30 am and wrap up around 3:00 p.m." she said.

It was a lot of reading and writing assignments which required that dedicated discipline. "It was very easy to get distracted but I took breaks," she explained.

Getting homework completed at home while attending to her parenting responsibilities often meant waiting till her daughter was asleep and pulling out her books later in the evening.

Stephanie realizes that to provide a better life for her daughter she needed to continue with her education. With her diploma complete she looks forward to a brighter future.

TINA ROIT

LITERACY AND BASIC SKILLS
ST. THOMAS

"I am hooked on distance education. I love it. Six years ago when I started, the last thing I thought about was going to college but now I am excited about the possibility of taking the horticulture program through Guelph University."



Taking online courses can be just what the doctor ordered. The Good Learning Anywhere online literacy courses became the best medicine for Tina Roit after several almost fatal car accidents.

Tina had a serious car accident in 2004 that left her with seizures and strokes. She had dizzy spells and could barely walk. In one week, she experienced 23 seizures that were not epileptic and were unexplainable. She was referred to a top neurologist for strokes and seizures and they never determined what was causing them. Without a reason for their cause, they also stopped with no explanation. What remained though are problems with talking, especially big words, and if she gets too excited she will stumble over her words.

In 2006, as a way to engage her brain, her speech therapist recommended she complete her high school diploma through correspondence. She graduated in June 2012. That experience helped her realize that although it was a slow process, she really did enjoy learning and didn't mind working on her own.

So when her employment counsellor suggested she try some of the free courses available through Sioux Hudson Literacy Council and the Contact North | Contact Nord online learning centre in St. Thomas, she jumped on board.

"It's more brain activity. Rather than doing crossword puzzles I do these courses," described Tina. "I have gained even more strength in my ability to concentrate, my short term memory, writing skills, and problem solving abilities have greatly improved."

Not only has her health and mental abilities improved but she discovered a compatible way for her to get the education she never pursued.

"It was a hard road to go down," Tina said about the consequences of her accidents. She had her driver's license taken away due to the dizziness and seizures, she wasn't able to work and brain injuries often come with the same stigma as mental illness.

Tapping into the online courses brought her around to believing she could restore her life.

"I am hooked on distance education. I love it. Six years ago when I started, the last thing I thought about was going to college but now I am excited about the possibility of taking the horticulture program through Guelph University," she said.

While recovering from her injuries, Tina and her husband set up a number of gardens in their expansive backyard. They have thirteen gardens scattered around the front and back yards including ponds with gold fish.

The benefit of using distance education is the course she wants to take is not close by and even if it were, attending school full-time would be challenging with her long term injuries. With the success of her high school diploma and the Good Learning Anywhere courses, there is no fear of being able to succeed in the next step in her education. Knowing that she overcame major injuries has provided immense confidence to pursue further education that will allow her to work in a field she loves.

PATSY ROY

PERSONAL SUPPORT WORKER
FORT FRANCES

“Even though I cried many nights wondering how I was going to get through it, today I wish I had taken the two year program.”



Going back to the classroom at 53 years old brought forth hidden strength to Patsy Roy’s tumultuous life. The unthinkable ripped through her life when her 16 year old son was killed in a car accident.

Rebuilding after her son’s death meant going to school and exploring a new career path. An employment counsellor in her hometown of Fort Frances led her to Confederation College and Contact North | Contact Nord online learning centre in Fort Frances.

A town of 8,000 people nestled on the border with Minnesota, Fort Frances is several hours drive from Kenora to the west, or Thunder Bay to the east.

Through distance education, Patsy was able to stay rooted in her community while she joined a handful of students around the province for the one year Personal Support Worker diploma.

“The first two weeks were tough, wondering if I did the right thing, going back to school,” reflected Patsy. “But it actually went by really fast. As the weeks went by I became used to the technology and being taught without teachers in the classroom.”

Still grappling with her intense grief, Patsy found some relief in the routine and challenges of her studies.

“Anatomy was tough, but we would go to extra classes in the evening and we formed study groups. All I remember is studying and studying and studying. I had a real desire to finish and worked very hard to get my 4.0 grade average,” she professes.

In fact, out of the sixteen students who graduated in 2010, she had the highest grades. She came to the college less than a year after she lost her son, computer illiterate and unfamiliar with the modern classroom.

Going to school required her to be self directed while at the same time forming collaborative partnerships with classmates, some over 20 years younger. Without a teacher in the classroom, she had to find ways to get their attention when she needed further explanation.

“When the teacher is in the classroom with the students they can see facial expressions that show we are not understanding what they are talking about, being on the video I had to find a way to interrupt and slow them down.”

Aside from getting acquainted with microphones, video screens and computers, she found that she actually liked distance education. Firstly, she did not have to disrupt her life anymore then it had been by moving away from her community. She still had one son completing high school and they could both finish their studies before making any major decisions.

There were only a handful of students in the Fort Frances online learning centre which helped them to create a supportive bond. With her focus, routine and supportive classmates, she passed a significant milestone in her life.

Patsy had operated her own home daycare for many years before her son’s death. She had a love of caring for others that she has been able to transfer to the daily care of 18 elderly people, only now, in their homes.

“Even though I cried many nights wondering how I was going to get through it, today I wish I had taken the two year program,” Patsy admits. Upon reflection she realizes she has more capabilities waiting to be discovered.

CHACITY SAWKA

LAW CLERK

KENORA

"I was really excited to get into the program and it was awesome!"



With the superior technology of today, living in Kenora no longer limits access to the educational opportunities found in the big cities.

Chacity Sawka really wanted to work in the legal field, however living in a town that was several hours away from a college or university that offered the law clerk program could have been a barrier.

The opportunity to pursue a career in the legal field came her way after being injured at her job at the Super 8 hotel. While recuperating she explored the educational and job options available with the help of the Ontario Government's Second Career program. This was her chance to pursue her dream.

"I was really excited to get into the program and it was awesome!" she exclaimed.

What she finds amusing though is she has never been to Haileybury where the Northern College campus is located and where the majority of her teachers deliver the course from. But most of the 20+ classmates have never been to Kenora.

The distance is a challenge for her personality though. And this wasn't her first time taking courses at a distance. She had previously completed a distance education course offered from Nova Scotia. It was strictly reading and assignments with no contact with other classmates and little contact with teachers.

"I am the type of person that wants to communicate face to face," she explained. "The teacher suggested we get into a study group, but I am the only one here in Kenora doing the program."

Facebook has offered the opportunity to connect with classmates and she was able to talk on the phone with one classmate who lives in Dryden, an hour drive from Kenora.

"She can at least relate to living in the 'real' north," she said with a smile.

Chacity found that when she went into the Contact North | Contact Nord online learning centre in Kenora she did not feel so isolated. "I went in one day a week for the entire day and then I liked having Fridays free to do my homework and catch up."

All of her classes were in audio format however they were introducing a video class that she preferred.

Although she was challenged by working alone she did appreciate the option of finding help in a variety of ways by going into the online learning centre when she was struggling with the material.

Before starting the course she knew the demand for law clerks was high and well worth the ups and downs of learning at a distance.

MELISSA SAYLOR

OASIS SKILL BUILDING AND PARO
WALLACEBURG

“I really discovered how much I love learning and would like to continue by taking a college program.”



When Melissa Saylor needed to upgrade her skills, she was referred to the Contact North | Contact Nord online learning centre in Wallaceburg, a small town surrounded by farms and an hour drive to Windsor.

Melissa had worked in her family's restaurant business waiting tables for many years and when they decided to close it down she was encouraged to upgrade her skills. Melissa, now in middle age, found it daunting to return to a school setting and learn new skills.

In 2010, she signed up for the OASIS Skill Building online courses. Grateful for the ease of online education compared to a busy classroom. She admits that she was shy and nervous about initially going into the centre. However, the staff and other students were friendly and welcoming.

She says it's mostly reading and then there are live audio courses where she listens with headphones. Her computer skills are good however she likes learning to use the latest software.

“I can get online at home as well but there are too many distractions at home,” she explained. “I would arrive at 9:00 am and stay till 3:00 pm and bring my lunch. At one point I was going five days a week.”

It was fairly easy for her to take several of the courses in a week. “I have probably done over 100 now,” she said. There are 200 courses to choose from and she was able to learn new skills in Microsoft Office, Excel and Outlook. She was considering many options for her future which included taking a few PARO courses. The PARO Centre for Women's Enterprise helps women across the province to start, grow or build new business opportunities. For those classes she studied from home however used the help of Contact North | Contact Nord staff to resolve a few computer problems she encountered at the beginning.

“I'm getting more skills and learning new things and there is always new ones coming out,” she said.

Her routine was interrupted when she had a bicycle accident that forced her to recuperate at home. In fact she had her arm in a sling which made it impossible to type and she was not able to sit for long periods.

“I really discovered how much I love learning and would like to continue by taking a college program,” said Melissa.

What appeared to be a devastating change in her life has awakened her love of learning and she appreciates the opportunity to explore the variety of options available.

PEGGY SHELSWELL

OFFICE ADMINISTRATION
CERTIFICATE
ESPANOLA

“With the accounting section the teacher was good at explaining but I did struggle with some of the concepts so I would go back and review the video. I could review whenever I wanted to which sometimes was after the kids had gone to sleep.”



The goal was to get a job that fit with her family responsibilities. Peggy Shelswell, who lives in the small town of Espanola, loves where she lives but with only a high school diploma her job options were limited to retail.

“For 20 years I have worked in retail. The grocery store and the discount department store,” she said. Her best option was to acquire some new skills.

Espanola is close to 100 km away from a college campus. She knew it was too inconvenient to travel the hour drive, so she made a visit to the Contact North | Contact Nord online learning centre in Espanola.

The Office Administration certificate through Northern College would equip her to seek work in an office environment that fit with her parenting schedule. It would only take her one school year and she would have valuable transferrable skills as well.

“I went into the centre everyday for both video and audio classes,” Peggy explained. “If I needed a quiet area to do homework I would stay after my class.”

Peggy does admit that it was challenging for her to get comfortable with the computers and software applications. “Two weeks into the program I said I can’t do this, what am I doing?”

With encouragement and support from both teachers and centre staff, she overcame her fears. “Once I realized that I was capable and I just kept telling myself I could do this.”

She admits that she had carried around a picture and quote from a graduate featured in the Contact North | Contact Nord course guide and every time she glanced at the picture she told herself, “if they could do it, so could I’.

What also helped was having the classes recorded and being able to go back and listen to her classes again. It provided Peggy with reassurance that if she misunderstood something during the class she could simply listen to the class again. If she really found a concept challenging, she would reach out to teachers and fellow classmates.

“With the accounting section the teacher was good at explaining but I did struggle with some of the concepts so I would go back and review the video. I could review whenever I wanted too which sometimes was after the kids had gone to sleep,” she said.

After completing the coursework, she spent two weeks on placement practicing her new skills. Once she graduated and with certificate in hand she began sending out resumes. Only two weeks after graduating, she received a job offer at the local optometrist office.

“I am very happy where I am right now but I also know that I can take my skills anywhere,” she said with confidence.

LIZA TANNER

DIETICIAN

STRATFORD

“Everyone should take the Learn to Learn course before pursuing online learning, especially those over twenty and not familiar with the latest software and technology.”



Stratford is known for great Canadian theatre and the vibrant and thriving farms that surround the city. Liza Tanner lives in Stratford and appreciates the healthy local food. It is what motivated her to pursue a significant career change. She wants to work as a wholistic health practitioner.

She found a diploma through Conestoga College, Dietetic Technician, that would provide the education she needs to pursue her career goal, however, it is all online. To prepare for the program, she went to the Contact North | Contact Nord online learning centre in Stratford to take the Learn to Learn online course.

“Everyone should take the Learn to Learn course before pursuing online learning, especially those over twenty and not familiar with the latest software and technology,” said Liza. She admits to having a Blackberry phone but doesn’t have a Facebook page.

Liza also admits that she has a procrastination problem and likes having the Contact North | Contact Nord online centre to go to every morning.

“Forces me to get out and keep me on track,” she said.

What Liza liked about the Learn to Learn program is that it identified her learning style. She had the opportunity to do the SmarterMeasures Inventory Test that determines her suitability for online learning.

“I found out that my strength is being logical, physical, solitary and visual. I don’t necessarily do group work well. It measured my computer literacy skills and technology skills. Lots of good information for what kind of learner I am,” she explained.

“Online learning is best for me. I don’t drive and I don’t have to uproot myself. I can also stay close to my family. I am very excited about online learning,” Liza says.

After completing the Learn to Learn she was ready to undertake the prep courses in biology and math. She has found the material interesting. The course warns you when you start that you will do a significant amount of research online. Liza likes how convenient it is to click the mouse and pop over to Google or YouTube to do the required research.

“We do experiments at home. They give you a list of items to do an experiment, or the virtual frog dissection on the computer,” she described.

Liza really likes the technical support available from Contact North | Contact Nord because if there are problems with the technology, help is available.

The other support she likes is the class chats and forums. “We can post questions on there and get help from other students. There is also a class lounge where we can form friendships. I haven’t myself yet. I’m a bit shy but nice to know it’s there,” she said.

This is a late career change for her. She has an ailing mother to care for and is a grandmother to five grandchildren. Online learning is making it possible to be there for her family, yet make her own career dreams come true.

CHERI TODERSCO

REGISTERED PRACTICAL NURSING
NIPIGON

“I was sent to the Contact North | Contact Nord online learning centre in Nipigon. It was ideal for me with four kids at home. I could be home during the day and do classes in the evening.”



Going from mill worker to nurse might appear to be an unlikely career change, yet Cheri Todersco made it possible.

Cheri was content driving a front end loader at the lumber mill in Red Rock, Ontario. She was also a mother of four having just started a second family with a baby on the way. Both she and her husband were laid off when the mill shut down.

“I was 36 years old,” explained Cheri. “And I did not know what I wanted to do.” She did know that she was not leaving her home in Red Rock, a picturesque town on the shore of Lake Superior, an hour drive from the city of Thunder Bay.

She just took one step at a time. It started one evening sitting with friends in the local coffee shop in the community centre when she spied a poster inviting people to learn about the Government of Ontario's Second Career program being presented by Lakehead Employment. So she went.

“I had to pick a career that there was going to be a job for me. The paramedic wanted a 70% to pass but nursing only wanted 60%, so I picked nursing,” she said. She admits she had trouble in school and didn’t want to exceed her capabilities.

In order to qualify for the registered practical nurse program at Confederation College, she needed to take the pre-health course. “I was sent to the Contact North | Contact Nord online learning centre in Nipigon. It was ideal for me with four kids at home. I could be home during the day and do classes in the evening,” Cheri said about the step that got her back in the classroom.

She admits that she was afraid of failing and being ridiculed. “Everyone knew that Cheri was going back to school. I didn’t want to be the one who failed,” she admits.

There were five students who took the pre-health course at the Contact North | Contact Nord Nipigon online learning centre. It was new for her but she grew accustomed to only hearing her teacher and using the computer texting program to ask questions.

“If we lost the feed because of weather or technical issues the teacher would email us on how to catch up. It was never really bad just frustrating sometimes,” Cheri said.

Although her family life was full, her attention went to getting herself prepared for the nursing program. She took chemistry and math, subjects she avoided in high school. It was not an easy twenty years later.

“I was able to get a tutor for chemistry and we would work over audio conference as well,” said Cheri.

It took being organized and a husband who helped and supported her need to leave him with the kids to go off and work on homework.

When it was time for her to attend Confederation College in Thunder Bay for her nursing course she went without fear. She knew she would succeed.

Three years after seeing the poster in the coffee shop, Cheri has been hired at the Thunder Bay Regional Hospital as a registered practical nurse.

TERESA WALICHNOWSKY

OFFICE ADMINISTRATION –
EXECUTIVE

KAPUSKASING

“I decided I would just go back to school and get a better job that can support me and my two kids.”



Getting a college diploma was the best way for Teresa Walichnowsky from Kapuskasing to make a new start in her troubled life. She experienced significant loss and spent a year grieving before being able to think about her future.

“I decided I would just go back to school and get a better job that can support me and my two kids,” she explained. Teresa is a single parent with very little support. She lost both her parents in one year, as well as her grandfather who she had a special relationship with.

The Office Administration – Executive diploma, from Northern College, looked like a good option and was available through the Contact North | Contact Nord online learning centre in Kapuskasing. Otherwise it was a two hour drive one way to attend on campus.

Teresa appreciated being able to take the time to complete the course, while still in Kapuskasing, allowing her children to prepare for a big move when they were at a good transition point in their own education. Appreciating the difficulty of change and loss, she took the opportunity to start her own changes with distance education.

“I have done lots of courses in computers and also worked with computers so I am comfortable with the technology. I was shy at first to speak up in the audio classes, but it gets easier,” she said.

With the long hours at the online learning centre and her kid’s activities, she would be doing homework at least three hours a night.

“At first it was really hard and the kids didn’t like it, but we got a routine going eventually,” she explained. “I would be in class from 8:30 am to 6:30 pm, but my daughter is also able to babysit.” A benefit of distance education is that she could also participate in the class from home when she needed.

“The more my kids are proud of me, the more I keep at it and makes me work harder,” she admitted. Even when she was ready to quit because of financial challenges caused by loss of funding, she hung in there. Her family and friends helped out and she was able to secure funding from the Ontario Government’s Second Career program.

What also helped in keeping her motivated in her studies was the friends she made in her classes. “The teachers don’t always answer your questions right away so we talk about what the possible answer might be,” she said. They keep in touch through Facebook and emails, and when they work on group projects they meet using Contact North | Contact Nord’s Centra web conferencing software.

Teresa describes herself as a ‘very determined’ woman and getting a new start by accomplishing her college diploma provides a lot of promise.

JOLENE WOOD

COMMUNITY ECONOMIC AND
SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT WORKER
DIPLOMA
ATIKOKAN

"I like having the structure of classes and homework. I also really liked what I was learning because it brought out parts of me I thought I couldn't achieve, like public speaking. Now I can make power point presentations in my sleep!"



It was quite a surprise to Jolene Wood that she was able to obtain a college diploma without leaving her hometown of Atikokan. A remote community with a population of 2,700 and a two-hour drive from Thunder Bay to the east and an hour drive to Fort Frances to the west.

She had been attending a community meeting held in the Contact North | Contact Nord online learning centre in the Atikokan High School and saw the computers and video conferencing equipment that allowed students to participate in courses all over the province.

"After attending that meeting I started thinking about going to school. I went back and talked with the centre coordinator who walked me through the steps to applying. Couple of months later I was accepted in to Northern College's Community Economic and Social Development diploma program and it all fell into place," explained Woods.

Jolene was able to fit her educational goals into her busy schedule of raising her three daughters because of the convenience of the online learning centre in her community.

She knew how much she loved learning after leaving Atikokan as a teenager to study at the University of Waterloo however she returned home before completing her degree.

Now married with a busy family life, she still wanted to keep learning. "It was a good salvation for me to go back to school," said Jolene. "I like having the structure of classes and homework. I also really liked what I was learning because it brought out parts of me I thought I couldn't achieve, like public speaking. Now I can make power point presentations in my sleep!"

Although Jolene was the only student in Atikokan taking the Community Economic and Social Development diploma, she made friends with others around the province taking the course. They worked on group projects and offered support through phone calls and online forums.

Jolene completed the diploma in the spring of 2012 and by the fall she had enrolled in another program, the Mining Engineering Technician. Adding to her other diploma she could see the benefit of gaining additional skills with the job opportunities in the future.

"I am strong in math and I like engineering. More and more women are going into engineering and with the mining activities around here it makes sense for me," she said.

The mining engineering courses are all done online from home which is much more challenging then her previous experience. She must discipline herself to a routine and to break the isolation, she sought out another student in the same course who lives in Atikokan.

"There is much more reading involved in this course which is also a challenge but I am looking forward to meeting my classmates and doing some rock sampling in a field work component that takes place in Haileybury," says Jolene.

Often times Jolene is sharing what she is learning with her daughters such as how volcanoes work. And while she is improving her knowledge and future employability, she likes demonstrating what lifelong learning looks like to her daughters.