

Overcoming the odds

Adult Learner Awards

By Kym Wolfe

Returning to school as an adult can be daunting. Imagine how daunting it would be if you were a single mother of a young toddler, if you had dropped out of high school due to mental health issues, had battled severe anxiety, depression and an eating disorder, and had spent several years in and out of long-term mental health facilities.

Everyone has their own motivation for making change in their lives. When Priya Khalsa discovered she was pregnant, she says, "I thought, I have someone else to look after now, and I can't raise a child like this." Against all odds, she was able to finish high school and went on to study at Western University, graduating this year with an Honours Specialization in Health Sciences and a minor in Psychology. Her son Aryan will turn six in June, and in September Priya will enter Law School at the University of Toronto. During her time in London Priya has been involved

as a volunteer with Regional Mental Health London, and helped create a comprehensive course for first year Health Sciences students. The program will provide both academic and mental health supports, to help reduce the levels of stress that students feel as they transition from high school to university - stress that Priya understands only too well from personal experiences.

Last Thursday Priya and 14 other individuals were formally recognized by the London Council of Adult Education at the annual Adult Learner Awards ceremony at London Central Library. Priya accepted the award on behalf of all recipients, each of whom has dealt with a variety of challenges during their journeys as adult learners.

In her heart-warming speech, Priya noted that "returning to school as an adult learner is not for everyone. The sacrifices to be paid are immense and the journey is long. It's a form of dedication and strength that is difficult to comprehend unless you went through it yourself."

"As much as I loved my undergraduate experience, the truth is a lot of the time I

felt rather isolated. I found it difficult to connect with other students due to the age and life stage difference. I am certain that other adult students have had similar experiences. Ultimately, we have to keep moving forward and believe that all our sacrifices will not be in vain."

While some recipients were involved in academic programs at the high school and post-secondary level, others were recognized for their perseverance in non-academic training programs. Billed as a celebration of lifelong learning, the awards focused on a wide range of achievements, from gaining employment skills to improved confidence in public speaking.

In a nod to that diversity, Priya noted that "every adult learner here today has a rich and unique set of

experiences to share. I applaud all of you. May the dedication and devotion that carried you this far continue to be the driving force in achieving your future goals and aspirations."

She also noted the important role that the LCAB plays in supporting London's adult learners. "The members of the organization, who are responsible for making today a reality, are just as special as this event itself. The London Council for Adult Education and its members have at their core the value of lifelong learning as a route to enablement and self-improvement. Due in no small part to their efforts, adult learners can have more optimistic outcomes, which in turn has a direct impact on the strength and cohesiveness of our community."



Priya Khalsala, seen here with her son Aryan, received an Adult Learner Award on May 14. The annual awards ceremony, hosted by the London Council for Adult Education, recognizes the efforts and contributions of adult learners in the London community.

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