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Inspiration for learning

By Janis Wallace, Special to Postmedia Network
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Western University professor Devika Pramila Jayawardena has overcome several barriers to a career in academia. She is one of 10 Londoners being recognized by the London Council of Adult Education at their Learner Awards May 25. MORRIS LAMONT/THE LONDON FREE PRESS/POSTMEDIA NETWORK

It's absolutely possible.

For anyone thinking about learning, that's the message from Donna Moore, treasurer and executive member of the London Council of Adult Education (LCAE).

"There are so many educational possibilities for different goals, different times. Explore them."

The LCAE recognizes the success of 10 people who did explore the possibilities at a ceremony May 25. Moore said they could give hundreds of awards to deserving people, and choosing recipients from their inspiring stories is a challenge.

"We're looking at how an individual enhanced their life through adult education," said Moore. "It's the impact, how it benefited them. It's not based on academic achievement."

The council hopes Londoners will come hear the stories, especially anyone considering further education in any form.

Often the recipients have overcome obstacles: difficulty learning earlier in life; health issues; cultural and language barriers.

Recipient and valedictorian Devika Jayawardena conquered several barriers.

After emigrating from Sri Lanka, she had to complete Canadian secondary school before following her dream of attending university. While juggling the needs of a toddler and giving birth to her second child, Jayawardena earned some of the highest grades in her class and was given a Trustee Award by the Peel District School Board.

With the support of her husband Asanka, she earned an undergraduate degree at Western University while having their third child and is completing a master's degree on the impact of the protein metallothionein isoform 2a (MT2a) in *E. coli*. Her work explored how MT2a binds with metals, such as zinc, and the relationship of elevated levels in diseases such as Alzheimer's, Pick's, and some cancers. Jayawardena starts her doctoral studies in biochemistry in the fall.

Through the long hours of studies and laboratories, her family has supported her completely – and the children, aged three to 12 now, will be at the LCAE ceremony, as well as her upcoming graduation and thesis defence. They are part of her success.

"My husband helped me a lot," said Jayawardena. "He made a lot of sacrifices. I couldn't do this without him. The children have made sacrifices too." She told a story about spending four hours in the emergency room with her youngest the night before a final exam. "When I think back, I was stressed. But I don't regret the last six years. I am here now and it was really good. My hard work paid off."

The two older children have already expressed an interest to follow their mother into science.

Like Moore, Jayawardena encourages people to follow their education dreams, no matter what negative comments others may give.

"If you want to do that, you can do it," she said. "Don't be discouraged by other people. I had three small children. My husband helped and supported a lot. If you study hard you can get good marks. If you make the decision to go (to school) no matter what people say, just go."

"Devika is a role model," said Moore. "Each recipient encourages other adult learners."

To hear the rest of the inspiring stories, she encourages people to attend the ceremony.

LCAE was established in 1945 to promote adult learning. The annual Adult Learner Awards event was initiated in 1990 to honour the work of Mary Gee, long-time executive secretary of the LCAE, and to celebrate the endeavours of learners in members' organizations.

IF YOU GO

What: LCAE Learner Awards

When: May 25, 2 p.m.

Where: Wolf Performance Hall, Central Library

Admission: Free. Everyone is welcome.

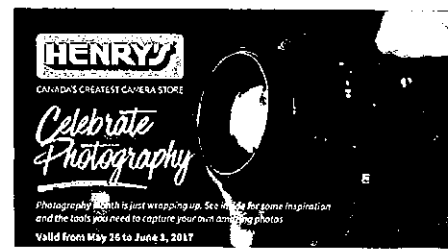
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