

Academics

Determined learners never done studying

BY DONNA MOORE

FIFTEEN LEARNERS FROM a variety of educational institutions and agencies received Adult Learner Awards from the London Council for Adult Education earlier this month. Two Western students were among these award recipients. A third Western student received the SAGE (Students Aged Gracefully through Experience) Student of the Year Award.

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Priya Khalsa was unable to finish high school due to mental health issues. She was living with severe anxiety, depression, addiction issues, a personality disorder, an eating disorder and spent several years in and out of long-term care facilities.

But during her pregnancy at the age of 21, she decided to finish high school and work toward recovery, simultaneously. She applied to Western the following year.

Returning to school has changed Khalsa's life. In 2010, she and her 13-month-old son moved to London, which became their first permanent home. They had never been to London before and didn't have any friends or family in the city.

As a single parent in a full-time degree program, it was challenging balancing academic commitments with child-care responsibilities. Khalsa worked hard to achieve a 90 per cent average in her second and third years.

This June, she graduates with an honors specialization degree in Health Sciences and a minor in Psychology.

Khalsa has been accepted to her first choice, the University of Toronto's Law School for September. She applied to both medical and law schools as she has an equal interest in both

areas. Khalsa never thought she would be able to accomplish her academic goals until she came to Western.

She has been an active part of the community, since arriving in London and has been a dedicated volunteer at Regional Mental Health London for the last three years. It has been an especially meaningful experience as a result of her personal history with mental illness. She is also a facilitator for the Leadership Education Program and received the Leadership Educator of the Year award last year for her passion and commitment toward the program.

Khalsa worked with Youth Opportunities Unlimited through Alternative Spring Break, London, in 2013, and taught English with Outreach 360 through ASB Dominican Republic in 2014. She served as an English conversation circle leader through the International and Exchange Student Centre.

She completed an Independent Study through her faculty (Health Sciences) and elected to focus her thesis on the feasibility of creating an online mental health support and treatment program for postsecondary students in Canada. Upon completion, Khalsa was offered a job as a research assistant helping to implement an online course for new incoming students.

Bimadoshka (Annya) Pucan, an Anishnaabe woman from Saugeen First Nation, Turtle Clan, became an active and contributing member of the local Indigenous community both on and off campus. She is a key player in advocacy for Indigenous student and women's voices as part of both the Idle No More and Missing and Murdered Aboriginal Women in Canada movements.

During her years at Western, she has developed herself both academically and personally.

Pucan returned to school later on in life, and has worked hard to earn high academic standings, while simultaneously raising a family. As a single mother of three boys (ages 15, 9 and 7), she dedicated herself wholeheartedly to being a positive role model to her children both on the

powwow trails as a jingle dress dancer, and in academia as a dedicated student.

Pucan successfully completed an undergraduate degree in Psychology and First Nations Studies in 2013, and, more recently, completed the new Masters' in Public Health (MPH) program.

She will not stop here, though.

Today, you will find her engrossed in literature and anthropological archives in the Western Libraries stacks, researching, as part of her upcoming PhD thesis, restoration and repatriation of cultural artefacts belonging to her home community.



PUCAN

In addition to her studies and familial responsibilities, Pucan has been an Indigenous Services staff member as the Food and Medicine Garden coordinator. In this role, she has demonstrated strong leadership, innovative thinking and a deep commitment to integrating Indigenous Knowledge into student services and programs. In a short time, Pucan coordinated a series of Indigenous planting and harvesting workshops, a tincture making workshop and a tobacco seed exchange.

Pucan also went above and beyond her coordinating duties to complete a project planning framework including a logic model with short and long term recommendations to improve future garden initiatives.

Jill Dombroski received the SAGE Student of the Year Award at the annual Excellence in Leadership Awards, presented by the The Student Success Centre last month. SAGE, a society for mature students, embodies both the wisdom of experience that mature students bring to Western and the flavour their contribution adds to the academic experience of all.

Dombroski will graduate in June with a double honours in Thanatology and Women's Studies. This fall, she starts her MA in Education at

Western. Her research will focus on the ways physicians deal with patient death.

She has already received much interest in her work from the medical community. Dombroski has received a student undergrad award from the Bereavement of Ontario Network, and now sits as a member at large on its board. Also, she recently attended the Conference of the Association for Death Education and Counselling in San Antonio, Texas, where she received the Undergraduate Student Paper Award.

In addition to being a positive role model to other mature students through her academic work, Dombroski initiated several SAGE events this year.



DOMBROSKI

"When I took my first university class at Brescia (University College) as a part-time student in 2007, I saw Ghandi's words posted in their library: 'Be the change you wish to see in the world,'" Dombroski said. "I stared at this mantra and wondered how I could ever contribute on this scale."

In 2011, at age 40, after being accepted as a full-time student, her change began.

"Each professor, administrator, care-taker, coffee maker, parking attendant, friends and, especially, my family, helped piece together my foundation," Dombroski continued. "I can best describe my university education as a brick house. These individuals each contributed one brick of support – either emotionally or financially – to help build my education. I realized it did not have to be about changes for the entire world – it was about the changes in myself that make the world better for my children and my family. I can be the change I wish to see."

Dombroski is making a difference for her two sons, Pompeyo and Pablo, who attended the awards ceremony with their mom.