

A Special Edition Newsletter of the PEI Literacy Alliance

Success Stories **Determined to Learn**



**Celebrating 2009 International
Adult Learners' Week**



Stacy Bernard

Stacy Bernard grew up in Sea Cow Pond near Tignish, PEI. She is 29 years old and married with four kids.

Stacy liked school a lot as a child and did very well in elementary and junior high school. High school was a different story. She found studying difficult because it was always hard for her to focus. She says in class, she either got it right away or she didn't get it at all. She found school boring and wasn't interested in going to class.

In high school, Stacy had lots of friends. Together they skipped class a lot and did things that were "much more interesting" than school. She says some

of her friends were able to keep their marks up even though they didn't go to class. For Stacy this was not the case. She remembers she failed Biology three times. However, she did graduate in 1997 with an academic diploma, but her marks were low. She says she always knew that she could've done better and this bothered her.

In 2000, she went to Compu College for 15 months. This course made her realize she was smart and could accomplish much more with her life.

A few years later she realized she wanted to be a Licensed Nursing Assistant (LNA). Her mother is a nurse and Stacy had worked in a kitchen in a Senior Citizen's home. She liked working with people and decided she wanted a career where she could help people. She also wanted to better herself and her family.

To get into the LNA program she was told she needed to upgrade her math and biology. In the fall of 2008 her youngest children were one and four and Stacy felt the time was right to begin upgrading.

Now in school, she likes math and finds it easy. Biology is still hard for her because it requires a lot of studying but she has the support and time she needs to learn. She says her confidence is increasing everyday and she now knows she is smart enough to follow her goals.

She says she would tell people considering going back to school that "everyone is smart enough - you just have to give yourself a chance."

Learning has been a fight for **Htay Win** all his life. At 38 years old his struggle continues as he learns a new language and a new way of living in PEI.

Htay Win is from a small village in Burma. His ethnic group is called Karen. There has been civil war in his country for decades and more than one million Karen people have been displaced since 1996.

As a child Htay Win wasn't allowed to go to school until he was eight. He remembers when he got his first piece of paper and a quarter piece of a pencil. "I loved these things very much."



Htay Win

In 1982, the army captured Karen men and boys and forced them to work as slaves. Htay Win left home to live in a safe Karen Centre. For seven years he had no contact with his parents.

Htay Win was 19 when he completed grade 10. He then went to the Karen teacher training college. "I thought often of quitting" he said, "but I kept reminding myself that I had my health and enough food so I stayed and finished." He taught for the next three years.

Htay Win was 22, married and a father when the Burmese army took over the centre. Everyone fled to Thailand.

Htay Win lived in a refugee camp for 13 years. He took every training opportunity that came his way. As a result, he found work as a lab technician, a teacher, a management trainer and a school principal. Although he was successful, he saw no future for his 6 children. He said "everyone living there was like a bird in a cage or a patient on oxygen. What if the oxygen was taken away?" There was no freedom and no future. So he applied to the United Nations to come to Canada.

Htay Win and his family have been in PEI just over a year. He says learning has been very difficult because everything is new. He has spent the last year learning English and is working on his GED. He has learned that in Canada you need a Grade 12 education to continue learning. He sees learning as a job "you have to do it even if it is difficult. We must learn all the time."



Cheryl Kerr and her twin daughters,
Kendra-Lea and Cassidy

Cheryl Kerr is 34 years old. She grew up in Belfast PEI and still lives there with her husband and four kids.

She liked school a lot as a child and found reading and writing easy. In high school this all changed. She felt like she never really fit in. Her self-confidence and grades began to drop.

She will never forget one day in grade 10. She had been struggling with math and the teacher asked her to answer a math problem that was written on the board. She couldn't. It was too hard. In front of all her peers, the teacher said "are you that far gone?" Cheryl felt completely humiliated. She says this is when she started to believe she wasn't smart. She quickly transferred into general courses. She says the feeling of "not belonging" simply increased.

To make matters worse she became pregnant in grade 12. This was very difficult and many of her peers made cruel remarks and ridiculed her. She did finish high school in 1992 but felt she wasn't smart enough to continue with education.

She began working with the Belfast Highland Golf Course and has been there for 14 years. Although she enjoys her job, for the last 10 years she has wanted to go back to school to better herself and her family. But those negative voices in her head kept saying "what are you thinking? You're not smart enough." She says "even now, nineteen years later, I can still hear that grade 10 teacher's voice."

In September 2008, she decided "today is the day", and registered to upgrade with Holland College. Going back to school has been a very positive experience for her. She feels happier and more confident and her four children and husband have noticed a big change in her. She says every day she has had to fight those negative voices but her confidence is growing. She's determined and plans to apply to the Environmental Applied Science program in February. She says it feels great to have hope for the future.

Cheryl wants to tell people considering going back to school that they can do it. "You will find a way to juggle your home life and school and it is so worth it. Don't let the negative voices hold you back."



Joachim Drew

Joachim Drew is 35 years old. He grew up in Newfoundland, but it was in PEI where his determination to learn blossomed.

Joachim went to a school for aboriginals and he says it was run “like a boot camp. If we were bad we had to kneel on pencils in the corner or with books in our hands.” Joachim barely managed to get his grade 8 and then he went to work in the woods.

He remembers one teacher who, in front the whole class said to him, “you are going to grow up to be a bum.” This marked Joachim’s entry into adulthood. He worked for years in various

labour jobs. He says he couldn’t forget the teacher’s words and wanted to prove her wrong. His parents both went back to school as adults and this inspired him.

In 1996, Joachim realized he wanted to be a professional diver. So he and his girlfriend moved to PEI so he could follow his dream. Once here, he realized he first had to get his GED before he could start the course. He says he was discouraged at first but decided he had to do it if he was going to reach his goals.

Learning in PEI was “a great experience,” he says. There were a lot of frustrating and doubtful times but “a relief to finally be at a school that was going to support and encourage me.” He says while in PEI, he gained “a whole new sense of confidence. Learning has changed my life.”

Joachim now has his GED and has completed an Occupational Diving course and Marine Emergency Duties for Small Vessels course. He can read and understand novels and he feels more confidence dealing with people at work. He owns his own diving business called Mi’kmaq Diving Services. He works with two large companies and has two full-time employees and plans to expand. He wants to teach Aquaculture diving in the future.



Joachim hard at work

He sees learning “as an ongoing journey” and plans to continue along this path. “I will never give up, to live is to learn.”



Marina DeRoy

Marina DeRoy grew up in Montreal. She loved school as a child but her home life was dysfunctional. She didn't have the support or push she needed to succeed in school. Some days she couldn't go to school because she had to look after her younger siblings. Survival trumped school and she dropped out of school in Grade 8. Since then going back to school was always in the back of her head.

When she was 17 she left home and went to work in Alberta. She had heard you could get a well paying job without your GED there. She spoke only French and worked hard to learn English in the evenings. By the time she was 19 she was making very good money. She stayed on this path

for the next 28 years. She took training courses that applied directly to the work she was doing and quickly moved her way up.

When her daughter was 16 years old, Marina remembers she asked for help with her school work. Marina didn't understand what her daughter was studying. This was an eye opener. She realized her younger children would soon grow up and ask her these same questions. Going back to school began to seem like the right thing to do. It would take her two years to convince herself to take the leap.

The "rich and rush" culture of Alberta had also started to get to Marina. She began to think that she and her children would benefit from a new experience. She has family in PEI and felt her children would also benefit from getting to know them.

Marina says moving from Alberta was one of the hardest things she's had to do. She had a house, a career and a life that she had built for her family. She sold everything and moved to PEI. Once her kids were settled into life here she went to Holland College. She says she doesn't regret it one bit. Going back to school has given her so much confidence and hope for the future, especially her children's future.

She will soon write her GED and plans to take education courses at UPEI. She says she would like to work in mental health.

She says "Holland College is fantastic. The second you walk in the door you enter a supportive, positive environment. Everyone is here to learn and help each other learn. You are not alone. We were all scared before we came back to school. Now I feel so proud."

Wendy Attama grew up in the Charlottetown and still lives there with her husband and 21 year old daughter. She has a 24 year old son who lives in Calgary.

Wendy left school only three weeks into Grade 10. She says she hated Junior High and by Grade 9 she was in the general program. She can't remember all the reasons why but she says at that time she didn't think school was important. She was more interested in hanging out with friends than studying and going to class.

Three weeks into Grade 10 her sister's daughter got really sick and had to be hospitalized for a month in Halifax.

Wendy went with her sister and was out of school for a month. When she returned, she felt she was too far behind to catch up and so she quit and went to work in a café. Later on she worked in a factory doing piece work.



Wendy Attama

For years she had it in the back of her mind to go back to school. She took night courses a few times but never liked it and just didn't want to be there. During the last five years this desire to go back to school has been present every day. In October 2008, she was finally finished waiting and registered at Holland College. "Getting the courage up to go back to school is one of the milestones of my life, along with getting married and becoming a mother."

"I love school now!" she says with enthusiasm. "I'm learning new things, meeting new people, and the teachers are so helpful. I've just finished reading my third novel" Wendy talked about not being interested in books before. She would come across a word she didn't know, become disinterested and put the book down. Now she looks the word up in a dictionary and keeps reading. She really enjoys mystery novels.

With her new confidence and new outlook on life, she has hope that she will get her GED this spring. She wants to learn more about computers and get a job working in an office.

She says "It's exciting learning things that you thought you couldn't possibly learn about. It makes you want to do and learn more. I would tell anyone who is thinking of going back to school to go for it. Don't keep thinking about it."



Daniel Bernard

Daniel Bernard was born in 1964 in St. Louis, PEI. During elementary school he was very happy and loved to learn. In Grade 6, he had an accident that would change his life forever.

Daniel was 12 years old when a drunk driver hit him as he was walking home. The driver fled the scene leaving him lying on the ground. He had extensive injuries that he still struggles with today at 45. He says the driver was caught and charged, but he has heard that he still drives drunk. This reality is difficult for Daniel. His right hand was hurt so badly it still causes him pain today. He also lost an eye and suffered some brain damage.

After the accident, he tried to go back to school but learning was very difficult for him. He also looked different. His peers teased him relentlessly making school a terrible place for him. He left school before he finished Grade 7.

He went to work in a potato warehouse for the next 8 years. He eventually got a job with the government working on the highways. He still works at this job but he is frustrated that it is only seasonal. He wants to be able to work all year.

Daniel realized that to get full-time employment he needed to get his GED. He says “now-a-days you need a GED diploma for just about every job.”

He’s been in school for almost two years now and he loves it. He says it feels really good to learn and he has so much support from teachers, friends and family. He says his son Zachary, who is 12, is very proud of him. Daniel laughed when he talked about his son teasing him. “He jokes that he might get his grade 12 before me. He might but I’m not quitting no matter how long it takes me.”

Daniel says being in school has given him new hope for the future. He wants people to realize they don’t have to be scared to go back to school. Holland College gives you so much support and you can learn at your own pace. He says “if you don’t have your GED, you better get it.”

Daniel quotes his teacher to explain his new motto in life, “take a small step everyday, just do a little bit more, and eventually you’ll get it.”

When **Lenny Walsh** was a child he found learning hard and only had negative experiences with school. He says he was labeled early on as a “non-conformer” and “not smart”. He remembers it was in grade 6 when he began giving up on school. After Grade 9 Lenny dropped out of school to work.

He went to work for Schurman’s building windows and doors. He really enjoyed his job as he got to work with his hands and create things. He worked there for 35 years and was very happy. He married and had a daughter who is now 33 years old.



Lenny Walsh

In 2006, the plant closed putting 60 people out of work. This was very difficult for Lenny. He has a strong belief that one should be productive and work hard. Now he found himself without a job and a lot of time on his hands. It wasn’t until he went to a career counselor who told him to go to the hospital, that he realized he had been suffering from depression. He was mourning the loss of his job. Once he got the help he needed and felt well again, he went back to the career counselor. Lenny wanted to do something new and so they developed a learning plan.

He knew he was on the right path but says it was still really difficult to get the courage to go back to school. “The fear of starting over was quickly forgotten by the positive environment of Holland College,” he says. He began to flourish immediately. He now loves school and says “it feels so good to learn. If you get the opportunity to go back to school, do it.”

Lenny has finished his GED and is looking for work. In the meantime, he says he will keep on learning. He is now taking his academic english and math so that he can apply to either the Environmental Applied Science or the Precision Machinists course.

He says he has much more confidence since going back to school. He knows he can do what ever he sets his mind to. “I am where I should be and I’m excited about the future.”

At graduation, Lenny was the master of ceremonies and he now sits on the Student Advisory Committee for Holland College. He says he wouldn’t have been able to do these things before going back to school. Making that choice is one of the proudest moments of his life.



Yvonne Lewis

Yvonne Lewis has always struggled with learning. As a young girl she felt outside her comfort zone at school and just wanted to be at home. At 16, she left school. She was halfway through grade 11.

Yvonne worked as a babysitter for years. She also worked as flagger and then in a fish plant. In 2000, Yvonne and her husband took a risk and built a 15 unit tourist lodge in St. Peter's Bay. For four years the business did quite well, but Yvonne noticed a small decline in tourists from year to year. She started to worry "if this doesn't last, what will I do?" She began to think about going back to school. She said it was really

scary thinking about school again. She kept asking herself "should I go? Can I learn? Can someone teach me?"

In 2005, she decided she had to give school a try. Her fears were put to rest immediately. She says it was a positive experience right from the beginning.

In 2006, her husband had a bad ATV accident and she had to take a year off to help look after him. Determined to get her GED, she went back to school the following year. "Once you start and get a few subjects, you get the motivation to keep going no matter what," she says.

Yvonne got her GED in 2008. She had to write the Math test seven times before she passed. She says she would have written it another seven times if needed. She loves school now and can't wait to learn more. Her confidence level has improved and she now sits on the Board of Holland College as a representative for adult learners. "I couldn't have done something like that before."

She is now taking a computer course and a Business English course. She plans to apply to the Human Services program and to work with adults and children with disabilities.

Before going back to school she felt "you work at whatever job you can get in order to get by, that's just the way it is." Now she says "I can do what I want. I can go back to school and get what I need to do what I want to do. This feels amazing."

Sara and Akbar Sadat have spent their entire adult lives learning: new languages, new cultures and hard lessons about surviving as refugees. They left their home in Afghanistan fifteen years ago to escape the aftermath of the Soviet occupation.



Sara and Akbar Sadat

Akbar attended a simple village school with no tables and chairs. They rarely had paper and pencils. Sara grew up in Kabul and attended a more modern girls-only school. They both always enjoyed learning.

As a young man, Akbar went to the USSR to study architectural engineering. He then spent three years in the Afghan army. After leaving Afghanistan, they had several difficult years in Turkey, Tajikistan and then Kazakhstan. They decided to try and make Russia their permanent home.

Their journey from Kazakhstan to Russia was a frightening ordeal. They had four children and Sara was eight months pregnant. A taxi driver stole all their belongings and official papers. They were forced to walk 24 hours with nothing but the clothes they were wearing. They finally arrived in Moscow with no money and nowhere to go. They sold all of Sara's jewelry to buy food. Eventually, Sara and Akbar found a tiny apartment. It was so cold that the blankets would freeze against the window at night. Sara and Akbar couldn't find work, so their son worked to support the entire family. It was "a very bad life," says Akbar.

The Sadats registered as UN refugees and tried for three years to get legal refugee status in Russia. On the advice of a UN worker, they applied as refugees to Canada and within six months they got the good news that they would be able to join Akbar's family who were living in PEI. Sara and Akbar agree that coming to Canada was the hardest thing about their journey, because it was such a "big deal." But Sara says, "We feel very happy and free."

The Sadats have been living in Charlottetown for over a year, attending language school full-time learning their seventh language. Going back to school has been "very good," they say. "We feel like teenagers," Sara laughs. "We are happy at school," agrees Akbar. It's also easier to help their five children with schoolwork. Sometimes the kids help their parents, too.

The Sadats have plans for the future. Akbar wants to have his professional credentials recognized and Sara would like to have a career in the medical field. Like many newcomers, their dreams also rest with their children and the future they will build in their new country.

Essential Skills

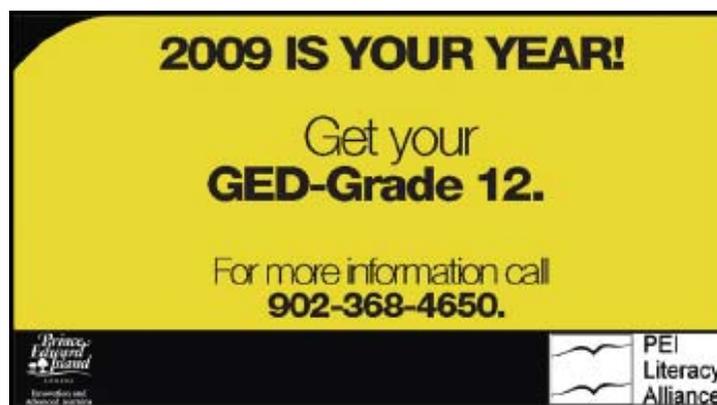
Essential Skills are basic skills that make it possible to learn all others. They help people participate fully in the workplace and in the community.

They are:

- Reading Text
- Document Use
- Numeracy
- Writing
- Oral Communication
- Working with Others
- Thinking Skills
- Computer Use
- Continuous Learning

Using Essential Skills can help:

- **students and workers** explore skills needed for various occupations.
- **parents** build children's confidence.
- **teachers** show students that what they are learning relates to the demands of the workplace.
- **career counsellors** help clients look at career options.
- **curriculum developers and trainers** bring workplace experiences to the classroom.
- **employers** develop job descriptions and training programs or decide what skills to look for when hiring.



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