

LEARNERS' STORIES 2009

This year the Canadian Commission for UNESCO is pleased once more to present learners' stories on its International Adult Learners' web page. Other stories by adult learners appear in the 2009 magazine *The Power of Learning*. We thank all the learners who have shared their experiences with us.

On this site we invite you to read the stories of:

- Theresa Gladue
- Danny Haines
- Michael Kamara
- Lyne Lafleur
- Steve Mattice
- Stephanie Nickerson
- Kelvin Rattray
- Carey Rigby-Wilcox
- Eric Savage



Theresa Gladue *Photo by Linda Studley*

My grandparents raised me and we lived in the woods. In 1967, when I was six, an Indian agent found us and we had to move back to the reserve so I could go to school.

School was foreign to me because, first of all, I spoke no English and, secondly, it was run by the nuns who were at the residential school on the reservation. So I was punished a lot and learning was not fun. I dropped out in Grade 6 and led a nomadic life for the next 25 years.

In the early '90s I lost a lot of family members due to alcohol and drug abuse, and a year later as I was lying on my bed I decided to end my life as I fell asleep.

I felt someone moving my big toe back and forth and as I was coming out my stupor, I had a fleeting thought. "My great grandfather used to wake me this way." I sat up and looked toward my feet and gasped because he was sitting there smiling at me.

He said, "Hello, my granddaughter. I came to tell you to quit drinking and that I will always be here to help you. The old ones raised you to be a proud Indian and we also taught you to be spiritual, to adapt and to know you can do anything you want to. Have faith in your ancestors as you cross into a new journey." When I awoke in the morning, I felt liberated and free.

In September of 1995 I went to the Obair Economic Society and took life skills, and in the fall of 1996, I went to a Native treatment centre. When I came back to Dawson Creek, I went back to Obair and redid the life skills component and enrolled in their academic program.

I was tested at a Grade 6 level and because I was constantly struggling with my work, the Adult Basic Education (ABE) instructor had me tested at the college.

The psychologist who did the testing told me that I had a learning disability called dyslexia. I let out a sigh of relief because now I knew that there was an explanation and that I was not just dumb.

I received my GED [General Education Diploma] and enrolled in the Social Work Program at the Northern Lights College—the first time in 1998. But due to my learning disability and [being] afraid to seek support I dropped out. But [I] went back in 2000 and graduated with my diploma in 2004. It took three and half years, but I did it.

Since then I have worked as a life skills facilitator, a program manager, a family support worker, a cultural facilitator, and now, as the Aboriginal Education Coordinator for the Dawson Creek Northern Lights College. I'm also a councillor for the city of Dawson Creek. I have won seven awards for community work and I write short stories. I wrote and produced a play called *The Cab Ride Home*, and gave the proceeds to the Dawson Creek Literacy Society.

Northern Lights College provides various technical, business and academic courses at its seven campuses in British Columbia. The programs include continuing education, trades and apprenticeship and prior learning programs. For more information, go to <http://www.nlc.bc.ca/index.php>. The college has two Aboriginal Student Resource Centres, located on the Dawson Creek and Fort St. John campuses. Information on those services is available at <http://nlc.bc.ca/services.aboriginal.php>.

Information about the Dawson Creek Literacy Society can be found at <http://literacy.dc.googlepages.com/dawsoncreekliteracysociety>. More information about literacy and learning in British Columbia is available at <http://www2.literacy.bc.ca/helpline.htm>.



Danny Haines

My youth reads like something only a movie studio could dream up. As a young boy I was in and out of reform school and, at the age of 14, I ran away to join a circus. Yes, I really did join the circus! I even worked a one-ring circus at the Canadian Parliament for the Trudeau family. I gained confidence in myself and it gave me a foundation to build on.

For 12 years I cared for elephants and learned how to design and build signs. The skills I'd learned in the circus helped me to switch to the sign business. But without a proper education I faced many literacy challenges that I managed to hide from co-workers and friends for over 30 years. I knew all the tricks to fool everyone. I discovered that copying was easy and if I didn't know a word I would look it up in catalogues.

Over the years I also coached, was the president of sports leagues and volunteered on various local and provincial boards. Nobody knew I had a problem.

I was also struggling with an addiction to alcohol. It was putting a strain on my marriage, career and health. My life had become unmanageable and I was on the verge of suicide. I knew I had to do something! I entered a recovery program but I was afraid. I knew that to be successful I was going to have to read better.

With encouragement from my wife, I contacted a program co-ordinator at Project Adult Literacy Society (PALS) [in Edmonton]. They paired me up with a tutor. This one-on-one learning is just what I was looking for. I am still working with the same tutor. Since then I have made great strides in my literacy journey.

Now, I am earning a living as a truck driver for the Edmonton Food Bank. I have been invited to speak about literacy issues for the United Way and various literacy groups. A highlight for me was when I was invited back to the Canadian Parliament, not to work a circus act, but to speak in front of the Senate about literacy. Most recently, I was honoured to receive the Council of the Federation Literacy Award for Alberta.

I am a member of the *Students for Students* steering committee at PALS, a student director on the Literacy Alberta board, and an Alberta learner representative for the Learner Advisory Network of the Movement for Canadian Literacy (MCL).

Danny's story originally appeared on <http://www.literacy.ca/themes/mcl/learners/index.html> with other stories about adult learners.

Project Adult Literacy Society in Edmonton, Alberta provides services for adults who want to improve their skills in reading, writing and math. Students are matched with volunteers to work on individualized programs. Movement for Canadian Literacy encourages adult learners across Canada to take a leadership role in informing the public about the importance of literacy skills and influencing policy development at a government level.



Michael Kamara

Michael Sillah Kamara, his wife and four-year-old daughter arrived in Halifax in the winter of 2007. Michael, 29, had moved his young family from their war-ravaged homeland, Sierra Leone, to start a new life in Canada. Michael had lost a leg in Sierra Leone's civil war—one of thousands of civilians maimed by the country's warring factions.

Despite past hardships, Michael has eagerly embraced learning opportunities in Halifax. First, he signed up for English classes at the Cunard Learning Centre. Then he moved on to the Flexible Learning Extension Centre (FLECs) to get his high-school diploma.

One night a week Michael gets extra tutoring at the Captain William Spry Adult Literacy Program. "The thing I like best about the Captain William Spry tutoring program is the way Linda [Oakley] is helping me in reading and writing and to improve my English," Michael says. "I also like the friendship of the people at the library as it gives me more confidence and motivates me to continue my studies."

Michael is determined to work hard and get his high-school diploma. He's been thinking a lot about what he wants to do when he graduates. He has considered accounting, but knows that he has a lot of work ahead of him. "I like math, but I don't think math likes me," he laughs.

He is also interested in working in the area of prosthetics and orthotics. "I would like to help people who have problems like I do. I would like to work as a technician to help people who have lost their limbs."

While his wife, who had been working full time, is expecting their second child, Michael has taken a job at the Halifax Infirmary hospital as a patient attendant. He works the overnight shift and then heads to school in the morning. He returns home by noon to pick up his daughter from her school.

Even with a short interruption in his full-time schooling, Michael is focused on a long-term plan. "I expect to graduate by September 2009," he says. "That's my plan. And I have to work hard. What I do next will depend on my grades. I have to get good marks."

That's why the tutoring help at the Captain William Spry Library is so important. "Thanks to people like Linda and my tutor, David Porter, I get the help I need," Michael says.

The Captain William Spry Library Adult Literacy Program, Halifax, is affiliated with the Halifax Community Learning Network, a not-for-profit agency that provides free adult upgrading programs in the Halifax Regional Municipality. It is one of 30 agencies funded through the Department of Education's Community Learning Initiative (CLI) and a partner in the Nova Scotia School for Adult Learning (NSSAL). For more information, go to <http://www.hcln.ca>

Michael Kamara was interviewed by Cecelia McGuire (Prosebusters), who wrote this story.



Lyne Lafleur

Raised in an English-speaking community in Northern Ontario, Lyne Lafleur stopped using her French mother tongue as a child. She also dropped out of school after Grade 10 and went to work in a hometown bar at the age of 16.

Now 45, she lives and works in a French-speaking community in the Gaspé region of Quebec.

The turnaround in Lyne's life began when she met her husband while working in the bar. Serge Leblanc was a French-speaking Quebecker who had gone to Northern Ontario to work in the forestry industry. He made a joke one night and Lyne responded in her almost-forgotten French. Lyne and Serge went on to develop a language all their own— bits of French and English jumbled together. They married and now have three children.

Serge's forestry work took them to Carleton-sur-Mer in eastern Quebec. Lyne soon discovered that she couldn't get a job because she didn't know enough French. "I couldn't even help my children with their homework," she recalls.

When her youngest child, Lyncia-Anne, was in Grade 1, Lyne signed up for an adult education program. "My French was at the same level as my oldest son, Steven, in Grade 3," Lyne laughs. "Steven helped me with my homework."

Within 16 months Lyne had received her secondary school diploma. She then completed a 680-hour program as an orderly and got work at a holiday camp for children with disabilities. She later took a one-year diploma in administration and worked at Wal-Mart and as a telemarketer. But Lyne wasn't satisfied with minimum-wage jobs.

She headed back to school, this time taking a two-year secretarial program at Centre de formation professionnelle l'Envol in Carleton-sur-Mer. "I was becoming a professional student," Lyne says with another laugh. "But I needed to get training to find a job that would pay for my family's needs."

Lyne now works as a secretary in a dental clinic, a position that gives her job satisfaction, security and a better income. She is also enrolled part-time in a secretarial program at Le Centre d'études collégiales Baie-des-Chaleurs, which will give her even more employment opportunities.

Her learning journey has given her something else as well. "Along the way, I became a teacher to my children," she says. "I wanted to prove to myself and to my children that I could do it. And if I could do it, they could do it."

Le Centre d'études collégiales Baie-des-Chaleurs is a provincially funded college in Quebec's Gaspé region. It provides technical and pre-university programs for full-time and part-time students. For more information, go to <http://www.cgaspesie.qc.ca/carleton/index.php>

Lyne Lafleur was interviewed by Cecelia McGuire (Prosebusters), who wrote this story.



Steve Mattice

I left school after Grade 8 to start working. I've had all sorts of jobs—truck driver, cowboy, skitter operator. ... But several years ago I had a bad rodeo accident. Because of my injuries, I couldn't do that sort of work anymore.

I was nearly 50 years old, and I didn't know what I was going to do. The things I was most interested in—like training to be a pilot—needed high-school graduates, and I had never finished school.

One day around that time I heard something on the radio about the Partner Assisted Learning program in Williams Lake, where I live. I wasn't keen on the idea of going "back to school," but this sounded different—designed for adults to meet their individual needs and interests. I've since learned that there are similar programs in a lot of places across B.C.

It sounded like it could be right for me. I decided to give it a try. When I arrived at the address, I went up and down the stairs more than a few times before I knocked. The first step through that door was the hardest I ever took.

I was greeted like an old friend. "We're not sure how we're going to help you yet," they said, "but we will help you." They found out what I was interested in and what I was good at. They realized that I liked to fix things, so they tore apart a computer for me to put back together—I learnt a lot of useful technical skills that way. All the while, I was learning to read and write better.

I had never been able to read too well. My wife had to take care of all my paperwork. Sometimes when I was given forms to look at, I pretended that I didn't have my glasses with me, or gave some other excuse. You find ways to fumble through.

Now, after just three years, I am about to complete my Grade 12. It's exciting—a real achievement. I'm already training to be a pilot. It's one more thing people said I could never do, and I'm proving them wrong.

It's never too late to learn. When I had the accident, one door closed for me. But I found the courage to go back into education, and now many new doors are opening. For example, I've been nominated to be a part of the National Indigenous Literacy Association.

I got the help I needed, and now I want to help other people. I plan to stay involved with PAL. I can teach people how to use computers. My example can show them that they can succeed, too. If I can do it, anyone can. That's what I want people to know—that's why I'm glad to share my story.

Steve has enrolled in a computer program at Thompson River University. He spends his free time repairing computers and teaching others how to use computers. He also is studying for his pilot's licence. Steve is also a member of the board of Literacy BC.

Steve's full story appears on the Literacy BC website at <http://www.literacybc.ca/Stories/stevem.php>.

The Partner Assisted Learning (PAL) program in Williams Lake, British Columbia, is a community partnership program designed to provide free, one-to-one assistance for persons wanting to learn to read, write and use numbers in their daily lives. PAL is a joint project of Thompson River University, Cariboo Chilcotin Partners for Literacy and the B.C. Ministry of Advanced Education. For more information, go to <http://www.tru.ca/dsd/prep/regional/wmslake/programs/pal.html>.



Stephanie Nickerson

Stephanie Nickerson is a happily married mother of two children, 14 and 11. Despite her happiness over the years, 36-year-old Stephanie had always known that something was missing.

Stephanie dropped out of school after Grade 10. "I wanted to work. I wanted to have a car and clothes. Other things just seemed more important." She worked in retail and in a fish factory. She also spent some time looking after her grandparents. When she was 21, Stephanie got married and started a family.

After her children started school, Stephanie wanted to get back into the work force. "But it was getting harder and harder to get a job. I needed my Grade 12 diploma just to pack groceries."

In the spring of 2007, Stephanie made what she calls "the best decision of my life"—she phoned the Barrington Community Learning Centre in Shelburne County, Nova Scotia, and enrolled. And in March 2008, Stephanie completed her General Education Diploma (GED).

Stephanie also entered an essay-writing contest for Adult Learners' Week, sponsored by Literacy Nova Scotia. She won in the community-based literacy organization category. The following paragraphs are from Stephanie's award-winning story:

Reading a book and returning to school have been goals on my "bucket list"—a list of goals I want to achieve before I die. Learning to me is like going to a theme park and going on your first roller coaster ride. You're scared at first; you experience many ups and downs along the way. When the ride is over, you're glad you did it, yet sad because you don't want the ride to end. ...

I know now I have numerous artificial burdens as to not going back to school or to finish reading a book. I used excuses like "I don't have time because I'm a mother, a wife, housekeeper, bookkeeper, banker, taxi driver. ..." Truthfully, going back to school and reading was something I feared. I was never any good at it; I feared failure. ...

No one in my class, instructors included, knew my secret. It wasn't something that I liked to talk about; it was embarrassing to me, especially around the kids.

I remember the morning everyone in the class was sitting around talking about the books they had read and how incredible they were. I quietly sat in my seat, feeling like an outsider, and being totally left out of the whole conversation. I could feel the pressure building inside, and my ears were getting hot, my cheeks felt flushed, and my heart rate was off the charts. I wanted so badly to be a part of the conversation. To my surprise, the pressure inside had built up so much that the words just exploded from my lips, "I HAVE NEVER READ A BOOK!!!" As soon as the words came out, I panicked, but soon I learned I was not alone. When you let something like that slip in class, instructors take it to heart. Seeing the sparkle in her eye, I knew I was going to be reading my first book.

Stephanie is now a student director on the board of Learning Nova Scotia, a part-time tutor at the Barrington Community Learning Centre and a volunteer with the local fire department. Stephanie also works in a lobster factory and is saving her money to train to be a paramedic.

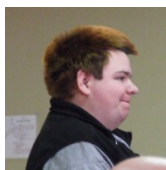
"Whatever doors open now," Stephanie says, "the most important thing is that I know I can do it."

The Barrington Community Learning Centre operates under the Shelburne County Learning Network and offers upgrading opportunities in a classroom setting.

The Shelburne County Learning Network is a non-profit community-based organization, which provides upgrading opportunities to adults 19 years of age or older who have been out of the public school system for one year or more.

Literacy Nova Scotia is a non-profit organization supporting the literacy community in Nova Scotia. For more information, go to <http://www.ns.literacy.ca>.

The Adult Learning Knowledge Centre (AdLKC) is an initiative of the Canadian Council on Learning and is committed to advancing adult learning across Canada. AdLKC serves as a national centre of expertise and action around adult learning and works to foster a pan-Canadian culture of adult learning. Find out more at www.ccl-cca.ca/adultlearning.



Kelvin Rattray

Kelvin Rattray, 22, is a student at the Perth-Andover Adult Learning Centre in New Brunswick. In 2007, Karen Garnett, his teacher at the Centre, wrote a letter to the Literacy Coalition of New Brunswick supporting Kelvin's application for a Sheree Fitch literacy award.

This is an excerpt from Karen's letter:

[Kelvin] was 20 years old and battling an extreme case of shyness. He was very unwilling to attend classes regularly. He would not look at me directly, he would scarcely speak, and he blushed continuously. Most of the time, his mother did the talking for him. ... Because of his shyness and anxiety, Kelvin was unwilling to come to classes... They had no telephone. ... I have since discovered that a phone would have made no difference, as he will not talk on the telephone. By March 2006, all contact with his mother ended. ...

In the fall of 2006, his Youth Choices case manager persuaded Kelvin to try upgrading again. This time he agreed to attend three days per week. ... One student in my class, Nicolle, who was very open and friendly, befriended Kelvin and he gradually started to come out of his shell. By December 2006, Kelvin had started

to make great strides. ... After Christmas, I asked Kelvin if he would be willing to attend four days per week, and he consented. ...

Kelvin made his first attempt at GED testing in June 2007. ... Although he only passed one of the tests (science), he was very close to passing both math and reading comprehension. The main thing is, he made the effort and overcame another difficult barrier with regards to his confidence.

This year, Kelvin is my most "loyal" student. He attends five days per week, and he works hard every day. ... He even came to school the week before classes "officially" started to help me get the classroom organized and new computers set up.

The following is an excerpt from Kelvin's award-winning essay:

I now look forward to school; home is boring. I get to work on a computer, which I can't do at home. I have learned how to use email and talk online to people. I've got over 500 friends. ...

I'm too shy to talk in front of people or with groups of people I don't know. I'm coming out of my shell a little bit by being in class, but I would love to get to know more people. I have to take it one day at a time. If I rush, I'll end up back in my shell and never speak to anybody. When I started, I never talked to anyone. Now I won't shut up. When others are talking, I put my two cents in when they stop in between sentences. ... I visit other people and have fun; I don't just sit in a corner and be scared to talk to people.

Kelvin won the Sheree Fitch scholarship and attended the awards ceremony in Fredericton in December 2007.

In December 2008, Karen reported that "Kelvin is still enrolled as a student in my Learning Centre (his excellent attendance record continues) and he has now passed three of the five required GED tests. He plans on writing the remaining two tests next February (2009)."

The Community Adult Learning Network (CALNet) works, under the Department of Post Secondary Education, Training and Labour, as an integrated network that focuses on quality of adult learning services, including computer training, literacy training and workplace training. Since 1991, the Community Adult Learning Program has helped thousands of adults in New Brunswick improve their literacy skills. You can find out more about CALNet at <http://www.cnbb.nb.ca/en/english.htm>

Kelvin Rattray was interviewed by Cecelia McGuire (Prosebusters), who wrote this story.



Carey Rigby-Wilcox

Hi. My name is Carey Rigby-Wilcox, and in school my reading problems started early.

Each time the teacher asked me to read in class I would hide behind the other kids to make sure that she wouldn't see me and call out my name. One day she was looking right at me and she said, "Carey would you like to read?" and I said, "I would just like to go to the bathroom. I don't want to read." And she said, "You go to the washroom. When you come back, you can read to the class."

I sat in the bathroom worrying and wondering what to do, and when I came back, the class was sitting there waiting for me. I looked at the stack of books that were laid out for me and I picked a book that I had heard before. I pretended to read the words in the story but I was just reading the pictures. When I was finished

with the book one of the kids yelled out, "That's not the way the story goes." But my teacher just said, "Good job, Carey," and I was never asked to read again in the class.

I went from grade to grade, really never learning how to read. I passed each class. I ended by making it all the way to Grade 12. I received my Grade 12 diploma, but I was still unable to read.

At the age of 18, I was pregnant and I received a box of books for my unborn baby. In that moment, when I was flipping through the children's books, I realized that I could not read the simple story that was inside. So that was the reason I went out and tried to find help. I found READ Saskatoon and I have worked with a tutor from READ Saskatoon for many, many years—and I now believe I can read very well.

My journey with literacy has guided me towards my deepest passion—books and art. I am now combining them and I have become a self-published author and illustrator. My childhood dream has come true.

Because of the books that I have written and illustrated, I am now asked to go to schools and talk to the students. I ask the children, "If I had never gone to a tutor every Sunday to learn how to read, do you think I would be here today as a writer and an illustrator?" And of course they answer, "No."

To learn more about Carey's books, go <http://www.seeabook.com>

Carey's story originally appeared on <http://www.literacy.ca/themes/mcl/learners/index.html> with other stories about adult learners.

READ Saskatoon's volunteer tutors offer learners assistance with reading, writing and spelling. Carey is a member of the Learners Advisory Network of the Movement for Canadian Literacy (MCL). Members enrich our understanding of literacy as they share their knowledge and experience with MCL and the wider community at a local, provincial and national level.



Eric Savage

At 14, Eric Savage was put into the special education program at his high school. He dropped out of school at 18 without a diploma. His high school had organized a work program for Eric at a local company, but Eric and his friend were caught stealing from the company and Eric was fired.

Eric tells what happened next:

I was hanging out with the wrong crowd and got mixed up in drugs and almost in male prostitution. I got in trouble with the law and got a sentence of three years' probation. I was 18 and I was living on the streets of Montreal. ... Then I contacted a family on the south shore of Montreal where I stayed for three years. They tried to help me, but I was too involved in drugs. ...

That year my sister and brother-in-law invited me over for Christmas. The next day they invited me to live with them. I had to abide by their rules in order to live there. My sister and brother-in-law encouraged me to go to school.

I looked for financial help from Emplois Québec and they referred me to the Réseau des carrefour jeunesse-emploi program. ... Through them I heard about the Yamaska Literacy Council, where I met my tutor,

Martha. She helped me with my self-confidence and helped me realize that I could do well. That was the first time I believed I could do it. ... The goals we talked about were to get my learner's permit and licence. Another was to improve my reading and writing skills. I also wanted to get into a welding program. I hope to get a good-paying job so I can buy a car.

[During] my first real lesson, we spoke about getting my learner's permit. ... My tutor had me go over the entire [driver education] book to make sure I could read the words right. ... Eight months later I went for my licence and passed on the first try.

Meanwhile, I was working on literacy books, and finished one and got a certificate. I got more self-confidence by getting it and knowing I could do well.

In September, I got into Adult Ed [at the Cowansville Academy for Lifelong Learning] and completed three math books. I was doing really well in French, so they had me do the final test for Secondary Three. I passed and am now into Secondary Four. I have a long way to go, but I can do it and won't give up.

I am going to school every day and doing well. Working with Martha has changed my life for the better. ...

I don't miss my old life; I am happy the way I am.

Eric, now 23, received several literacy honours in 2008, including the provincial Recognition Award for Adult Literacy (Learner) in Montreal on April 7th, and the Co-operator's Learner's Achievement award at the PGI Golf Tournament for Literacy on September 25th. On October 28th, he was the Quebec recipient of the Canada Post Literacy Award. The above story is an excerpt from Eric's award-winning essay. Read the full story at <http://www.yamaskaliteracy.ca/index.htm>.

The Yamaska Literacy Council is a not-for-profit organization in the Eastern Townships of Quebec dedicated to improving literacy skills. It serves English-speaking adults in the western section of the Eastern Townships School Board. It is a member of the Literacy Volunteers of Quebec (LVQ), a network of Anglophone literacy groups. For more information on LVQ, go to <http://www.literacyvolunteersqc.ca/>

The Cowansville Academy for Lifelong Learning is part of the Eastern Townships School Board. For more information, go to <http://www.etsb.qc.ca/adultcowansville/index.htm>