

Back on track

Adult high school helps students achieve academic goals



Stephanie Smith stands in front of the sign at St. Michael's Adult Education high school, located at 477 Detroit Street.

(Windsor, Ontario, Sept. 30, 2014) – Becoming a parent can be the toughest task anyone can take on, but it can also be an incredible motivator. For Stephanie Smith, it was just the inspiration she needed to finish her high school diploma.

In 2012, at the age of 30, she adopted a brand new baby girl. Earlier this year, she walked across the stage at her graduation ceremony – baby in arms – to pick up the high school diploma she earned from St. Michael's Adult Education Catholic High School.

“It was a very emotional day for me,” she said, “especially to have my parents tell me they were proud of me. It was a great feeling of accomplishment. I felt like I was on cloud nine.”

For a number of reasons, Smith was forced to leave high school early while she was a Grade 11 student at Century Secondary School. Besides battling depression, she was diagnosed with endometriosis, and needed to have three surgeries.

“I spent a lot of time in the hospital,” she said. “I was living on my own, trying to balance work and school. I ended up just needing to work to survive.”

Smith had several jobs in retail and hospitality, and bounced around from a number of jobs as either a waitress or bartender. After several years in British Columbia, she returned home to Windsor, settled down and adopted a baby. It was that life-altering decision that made her realize she needed to finish high school.

“When she gets older, I’m going to need to push her to stay in school and get as much education as she can,” she said of her daughter, who recently celebrated her second birthday. “I didn’t want to be a hypocrite by telling her to get her education when I didn’t have it.”

She reached out to St. Michael’s, and after an assessment to determine how many credits she would gain for life experience, she learned that she only needed four credits to graduate. She took an English course, a business course devoted to using computer software, a literacy class, and another focused on anthropology. She also enrolled in a co-op program.

Through it all, she worked closely with Gina Parent, a former teacher and guidance counselor who has been at the school for about 17 years.

“Gina was amazing,” she said. “I had been out of school for 13 years, so coming back wasn’t easy. There were times when I just wanted to quit, but I realized that was what I had been doing my whole life, and Gina helped me through that. She was my inspiration.”

Parent said Smith is typical of many of the 200 students at the school. Some are considering post-secondary education, but most are there to earn a high school diploma so they can enter the world of work. The scheduling format, which consists of four three-month semesters, or “blocks,” is a good way to fast-track the students towards their goal, she added.

“It’s the quickest way for them to earn credits,” she said. “And it’s beautiful to see them graduate. They’re so happy. They started something and actually finished it, and they’ve had to balance and juggle a lot to do it. It gives them such a huge sense of accomplishment.”

Smith doesn’t have any definite plans, but she’s now looking at going to St. Clair College in January, possibly to take photography and interior design. She’s come a long way, especially for someone who, at her lowest point, even tried taking her own life.

“I’m glad I wasn’t successful,” she said. “I have a beautiful daughter now, and I’ve finished high school. It’s a really good feeling. I would highly recommend this place.”

