

Back to School

By JENNIFER SMITH

Every September as thousands of students begin leaving through the pages of new textbooks and testing out sets of felt markers, another cohort of learners turns over a new leaf, challenging themselves and our very conception of what makes a student.

Hitting the books when you're over 50 years old is not as uncommon as one might think: in fact, its becoming quite common place in Central B.C.

Last year, six percent, or roughly 300, of the students who attend Okanagan College were over the age of 45, including one student who still attends class regularly at the age of 92.

One might chalk this up to new retirement jitters, but there are plenty of well-established professionals working and still looking to push their boundaries.

The wife of this newspaper's publisher, for example, has been making room for school and work for over a decade, and is very close to earning a fine arts degree.

It's a way to exercise her creative side, she explains, noting she's aware it likely won't reshape a career path.

"I don't think it's a matter of what you'll do with it," said Terry Tuck.

"If you want to be a writer, you need to write. If painting is your thing, then you paint. It's just a part of you."

Tuck took a convoluted route to finishing her education:

As a member of the Okanagan College library staff and, later, the information technology department, she began taking classes upon discovering staff were well-come to take a student spot if the class was not full.

Originally, a student of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, the coursework gave Tuck a chance to get in touch with a passion she'd long shelved.

"I left it sort of on the back burner while I was doing everything else—working, a housewife, she said. "But I think it adds to my life."

Tuck enjoyed the classes and started feeling her way through programs, pursu-

ing areas of coursework she excelled at and consistently making good grades.

One day, an instructor stopped her in the staff room and encouraged her to take the work to the next level and get credit for her efforts.

And with that, a few art history courses ignited a new quest to finish what she started. Tuck was finally going to complete her degree.

There was a short period before Okanagan University College split into Okanagan College and UBC Okanagan, when she was able to work a job share to add a few additional courses to her roster. But otherwise, she's never taken more than one or two courses per semester.

"I never look back. I only look forward," she said. "So I don't really know how long it's taken."

And it doesn't really matter to her: either. She isn't trying to forage a new career path or get the right score on a test.

"I think you have to be knowledgeable of other areas of life," she said. "This way I can work both sides of my brain."

On the job, participating in classes has proven a great resource for her with students.

"When I'm dealing with a student and they say, 'My courses are too much,' I can say, 'Yes, I've been among you,'" she said.

It doesn't come with sacrifice, though.

This semester she's taking two courses, which means leaving work an hour early and spending the evening in classes that run through

9:30 p.m. And though she's focused on drawing and painting, there's really no single piece she's done to date that she can hang on the wall and say, "There, I've done it."

Rather her greatest success is in the journey she's taken, particularly in taking "the big step."

Working in the library, rules were very important to her and learning to let go of the rules and move from the realistic to the abstract took more than a little coaxing.

"I met one instructor who said that if you could hold someone's attention for 30 seconds, then you've really achieved something. If you have something that somebody just walks right past, then you haven't accomplished it," she said.

To complete her degree, Tuck moved over to UBC Okanagan, where 1,192 students were considered mature students (over the age of 25). The figure includes 300 masters degree students and 50 doctoral candidates, but it also includes 12 people plugging away at coursework who are over 65.

"It's one step at a time. You don't go for a degree to start with," said Tuck, noting "and you add a different dimension to the classroom too."

When her teachers describe art in the 60s and 70s, Tuck has first hand knowledge. When the younger students hold back, too nervous to ask a question, Tuck is more than willing to hold up her hand.

Oh, and there's another bonus as well. "It probably keeps you a little younger," she laughs.