

Profile for Joanna Domienik  
By Jose Gabriel C. Sevilla

**Academic Upgrading Program  
Puts Learning Back on Track**



Joanna Domienik leads many lives each with their own share of challenges and opportunities. She is an immigrant, a college student and a single parent. Joanna's goal has been to complete her education and work as a nurse in order to help the people of her community as well as ensure a good life for her child.

The challenges of single-parenthood, managing a college student's busy schedule and improving her English skills became too tough for Joanna to overcome.

"I was not failing my classes but the demands of college became too difficult to manage," Joanna recalls.

College course workloads are notorious for requiring all of a student's time and Joanna struggled with this and balancing her other responsibilities. She doubted whether she could continue pushing herself in multiple directions and still do well. "I didn't want to just get passing grades, I wanted to truly learn," Joanna says. "But I was falling behind."

Thankfully, college counselors suggested that Joanna improve her English skills by looking into the Academic Upgrading Program offered by The Toronto Centre for Community Learning and Development (CCL&D).

“At first, I was disappointed, I wanted to stay in college and I thought this program was a step back for me. Then, I realized that in CCL&D everything is planned out for you, that there’s no stress here,” she says.

Her initial perceptions and fears were reversed as soon as she got to know more about the Academic Upgrading Program and the community behind it. From the hopelessness she felt at being unable to continue her course, she soon regained her excitement to learn, overcome her challenges and get back on track with her studies.

“The teachers, the staff and the students made me feel at home right away, I made friends with everybody,” Joanna says.

A low student-to-teacher ratio and the understanding of the barriers facing students returning to education are the key strengths of CCL&D’s curriculum. This, coupled with the organization’s focus on community building, makes a positive impact on students and participants.

Joanna was soon able to resume her English Level 4 studies in a more relaxed setting with instructors that took her other responsibilities and challenges into consideration and tailored the curriculum to maximize her schedule and her needs. This allowed her to continue her education at her own pace.

Instruction at CCL&D is goal-oriented. Instructors and staff make it a point to work backwards from a student's particular goal. This ensures that the right first steps are taken to revitalize quality learning.

“The Academic Upgrading Program is just the first step,” Joanna explains. “This is the place where I want to learn and develop and they have helped me define a path towards my goal.”

The Academic Upgrading Program aids participants in communication, numeracy, and computer skills and develop a new self-awareness that enables them to anticipate and contribute as active members of the community with individual training plans. Up to 10 student participants are accepted at a time.

Students are often self-referred, sometimes referred by a friend, relative or caseworker. They come motivated to gain skills that will enable them to proceed to further education

and training and employment. CCL&D believes that only by focusing on the individual's capacity can increased community capacity be ensured.

"There are options out there for students who want to learn but who have other challenges to deal with in their life," says Joanna. "It is a lot of work but there are great teachers here and friendly people. We develop long term goals for our future and it gives us hope and makes us feel good about what we do in life."

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--By Jose Gabriel C. Sevilla  
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