

# Back-to-school mom forced to succumb to dust bunnies

Best intentions come face to face with reality.

Natalie Gerster was determined her kids weren't going to suffer when she decided to go to teachers' college full time.

So she managed somehow to shoehorn the lives of daughter Jordan, 10, and son Sasha, 7 — hockey, beavers and guides, Ukrainian dancing, swimming and the rest of it — around a gruelling schedule of classwork.

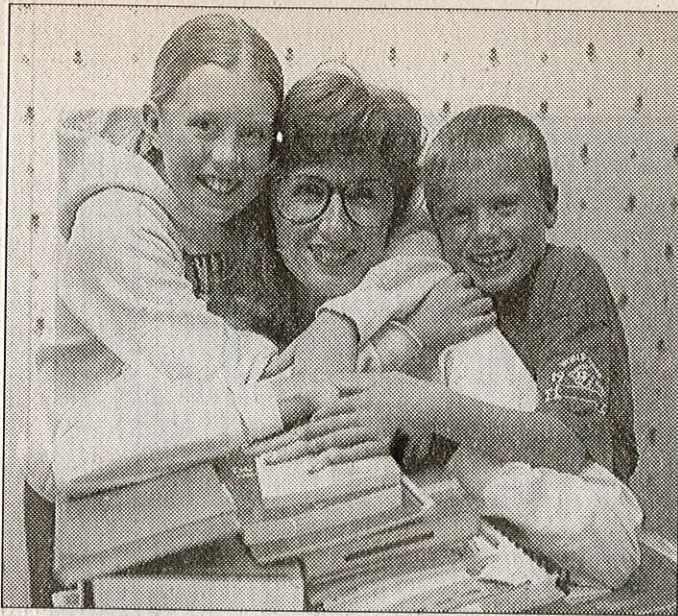
At least until January, when she got pneumonia. Then it was clear something had to give. So she turned her house over to the dust bunnies.

"I decided not to do any more housework for the rest of the year . . . By the end of the school year what we really needed was an Eddy match, not cleaning fluids. Forget the dust bunnies; they got to be roaring lions."

For the last few weeks, since she graduated from Althouse College, Gerster's been playing catch-up, bringing order back to the home, even slapping on some paint and new wallpaper here and there.

Thousands of women such as Gerster are finding their way back to universities, accounting for the bulk of the increase in student populations in the last decade or so. Many, such as Gerster, are making career U-turns.

Gerster, 44, graduated from business college and worked in a variety of jobs. She began picking up university courses at Western, eventually completing her business degree. She quit her paying job in 1987 to spend more time with her two children, and began to get active in volunteer work in the schools.



Natalie Gerster, who returned to university to train as a teacher, says support from her children Jordan, 10, left, and Sasha, 7, helped her survive.

"I liked what I saw in the schools. I was kind of thinking I'd like to get involved in something like this. . . . Now that I've done the year at Althouse, I know I've made the right decision. I love it."

She feels that with her experiences, she'll bring something different to teaching than younger graduates.

"I have my own children and basically I kind of look at it, if this was my daughter acting up, not behaving, not paying attention, not doing any work, how would I handle my own kids?"

Gerster says support — from children, partners, family — is the key to success for adults re-entering university. "What you have to do is set up an information and support system. If it's not there, I don't know that I could have done it."

Gerster's now looking for work teaching accounting in a secondary school somewhere in the London area.

## GROWING PRESENCE OF WOMEN

Both in numbers and influence, women have moved into post-secondary education in a big way. According to Statistics Canada:

□ 1.1 million women held university degrees in 1991, an 86-per-cent increase since 1981. The number of men with a degree increased 47 per cent in that period.

□ In 1990, 246,000 women were attending full-time undergraduate programs, compared with 222,000 men. Women also are more likely to be enrolled in part-time and continuing education programs.

□ In 1990-91, for the ninth consecutive year, more women received university degrees than men: 84,000 compared with 68,000.

### THE REASONS?

□ According to Rebecca Coulter, an education professor at Western's Althouse College, "Women have raised expectations about what they can do in life . . . There's been this permission to go back (to school) — self-permission and permission from wider society."

### THE RESULTS?

□ Women have been leading heated campus debates everywhere about course content; pushing hard on social equity issues; calling for more equitable hiring practices; and demanding safe and non-discriminatory environments.

Says Coulter: "I think a lot of the debate about what we should be teaching is at least partly attributable to the growing consciousness of women wanting to learn about themselves in the curriculum."

## CHANGING FACE

▶ 1978-92 The number of Canadian university students older than 25 grew from 72,635 to 136,015

▶ In 1992, about 50,000 of 125,000 applicants to community colleges in Ontario were mature students