Bernice Huinink remembers the first time her children sent her a care package.

It was filled with everything a exam-harried student could want — hand cream, a postcard wishing her luck, gum and chocolates — the memory still brings tears to her eyes. It was reminiscent of what she had packaged up for the two children attending college and university.

For the Embro resident, returning to school has narrowed the generation gap.

"When my children are heading into an exam period or working on an essay I can really relate to the stress they're under," said Huinink, a mother of six.

Huinink, 44, who has attended the University of Western Ontario (UWO) on a part-time basis since 1991, had always set her sights on a university degree.

She is taking a general bachelor's of art degree, but plans to major in English. Huinink is about halfway through the program.

She had obtained her Ontario Teachers' Certificate, before a university degree was mandatory, but the Grade 1 teacher at John Knox Christian School alluded to the things she learned.

"I even felt guilty, if I sat with a book."

But she reached a point where she felt comfortable taking the time for herself. Wadsworth initially took an OCA course and after flying through the course with over a 90 per cent average, she turned her sights on university. It was love at first class for the former court stenographer. Immersing herself in university life was extremely rewarding, she said.

She maintains a partial course load because she found full-time too overwhelming. especially in Classical Studies — her area of concentration. She has just entered the first year of the master's program in Classical Studies.

She stresses age is no excuse for not trying.

"I have always been scared of becoming senile. It was important to me to keep my brain active, to keep using it," she explained. "It may take me longer to figure out something out, but I still get there."

School has also proven a refuge, after Wadsworth was diagnosed with breast cancer. Even though she was required to have radiation therapy, she continued to keep up her schooling during the period. Being able to concentrate on university, she believes helped maintain a positive attitude.

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Georgina Wadsworth

Georgina Wadsworth felt the pull towards furthering her education. After a hiatus to raise her family, Huinink returned to teaching the same year she began taking courses at UWO.

"It was amazing how returning to school suddenly made my world seem suddenly bigger," she said.

It hasn't always been easy. She's suffered through her share of difficult courses including her current one — Introduction to Biology.

"It has been the most incredibly difficult thing I have ever had to do, but the experience has been wonderful."

"Biology and psychology are as foreign to me as learning to read has to be for my first graders," explained Bernice Huinink.

She uses her experiences with biology and an earlier psychology course to demonstrate how it has made her more empathetic towards her own young students.

"Biology and psychology are as foreign to me as learning to read has to be for my first graders," explained Huinink.

She views her return to school as helping her improve as a teacher. She has been able to use things she's learned in biology in her Grade 1 social studies classes.

She has also been able to apply her Children's Literature course to help develop a language arts program for Grade 1 classes at the school.

"In the past I would have felt too inadequate to do it, but that's no longer the case," Huinink said.

She has found it difficult keeping up her grades since returning to teaching full-time.

"Something had to give between school and work. I use to get A's, but now that I teach full-time it's hard maintaining those grades," she said. She sets aside three nights a week to study. Even with work and studies Huinink still makes sure there is time for her children.

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