Truant in kindergarten earns medical degree

Ray St. John started skipping classes in kindergarten and never really stopped. He quit after completing Grade 12 at Guelph Central High School and went to work.

That was in 1957.

Saturday, he became Dr. Ray St. John when he graduated from the University of Western Ontario faculty of medicine convocation.

St. John, 36, was one of 102 graduating medical students in a convocation celebrating the university’s 100th anniversary.

Quitting school was an easy decision 17 years ago — he didn’t like it and, he admits candidly, “I didn’t do very well either.”

He spent more than four years as a sales technician for Olivetti Canada in London before he and his wife moved to Brantford where they tried sales with Proctor and Gamble. That lasted less than two years.

Meanwhile, St. John had seen a coronary bypass operation extend his father’s life to give him two years of active retirement before death.

Medicine was also playing a large part in the start of his family following three early miscarriages by wife Pat.

And so the St. Johns moved back to London and he went back to school. Although he never took Grade 13, he had completed the first year of a university arts course in night school while working.

He gained admission to a second-year course as a mature student and, after obtaining an 81-per-cent average, to medical school.

Pat said Saturday that Ray had been unable to sell and needed a bigger challenge. The decision to go into medicine had full support of the family, which moved from a four-bedroom house in Brantford to a two-bedroom married student’s apartment in London.

Home and car were sold and government and personal financing combined to pay for the return to school.

Pat took a part-time job and Ray babysat two little children and a baby and then studied when she got home from work.

The toughest year was the first year in medical school.

With no science background, the switch in medical studies was tough and brought Ray’s lowest marks. But he passed, and the marks have improved every year since.

That year was the one period when he had doubts about his return to school and difficulties were complicated between Christmas and New Year’s that year when Pat took her first run at driving a snowmobile and ended up in a ditch with two broken arms.

Actually, he says with a smile, the accident was a good thing because she had to quit work and look after the kids which gave him more time for studies.

“Since I was through that first year of medicine,” he says, “I knew I would make it.”

The new doctor will intern at St. Joseph’s Hospital and, eventually, hopes to establish a general practice.