

It was tough going, but mother of three proud to graduate



'Going back to school is a very difficult thing to do when you have a family and a house and responsibilities that most students don't have,' says Colleen Debert, left, president of the London Union of Unemployed Workers.

By Mark Skeffington
The London Free Press

London social activist Colleen Debert has walked for the rights of the poor.

Today, she'll walk across Alumni Hall's stage to collect a degree in political science from King's College at the University of Western Ontario.

The two walks are linked, since she credits her studies for making her an activist. "I got into social activism because I was studying political science," she said Thursday.

The single mother of three, who is president of the London Union of Unemployed Workers, is one of 4,799 Western students who will graduate over the next week during the university's 254th convocation.

SCRAPING BY: But few of those graduates have Debert's background. Debert, who is in her 40s, had to balance her studies with raising her children, who are now 19, 13, and 11, while scraping by on social assistance and student loans.

"Going back to school is a very difficult thing to do when you have a family and a house and responsibilities that most stu-

dents don't have," she said.

In 1985, after 18 years of being out of the education system, Debert became a full-time student in social sciences. Not liking it, she switched to political science on a professor's suggestion and found it a natural fit.

After a stressful first year, and a lot of strain on her family, she switched to part-time studies.

About 3½ years ago, Debert started using what she was learning to get involved in community issues, particularly issues that affected single mothers, the working poor and the unemployed.

Debert said she hoped other single mothers on social assistance realize they can go back to school and get out of the stay-at-home welfare trap.

"You sort of get stuck in a rut when you're stuck at home all the time. You need to feel good about yourself and going back to school certainly did that for me."

Debert said she is undecided about whether to enter politics now she has her degree but plans to continue with her social activism regardless.

"I strongly believe in what I'm doing and I feel I'm in for the duration."

WESTERN



CONVOCATION

WHERE: Alumni Hall on UWO campus starting 3 p.m. each day.

TODAY: 521 students will graduate from Western's applied health sciences, medicine, dentistry and nursing faculties, as well as King's College. Bill Brady, vice-president and general manager of CFPL Radio, will give the convocation address and receive an honorary degree.

SATURDAY: Students from the faculty of education graduate. Shirley Thomson, director of the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, will receive an honorary degree.