

Journey shows the power of 'baby steps'

BY JASON WINDERS

DEBRA HAWTHORNE'S TRANSCRIPT reflects a postsecondary experience more than three decades in the making. And when she takes the final few steps of that journey at Convocation next week, the Western staffer will stand as a testament to passion and determination.

"It was either wild or crazy – I don't know which," said Hawthorne, who has worked as an administrative assistant in Health Sciences since September 2013. "The experience has been an eye-opener in many ways. I learned a lot about a lot – and a lot about me and what I can do. You may think you aren't capable of doing something, or something is too big, too far away. But all it takes is baby steps and organization."

In 1981, a passion for music sparked by a high school instructor led her to Concordia University in Montreal. Even then, she wasn't the typical student, as she already had eyes on starting a family.

"We were not long married and the family just started coming," she laughed. "My first course I did while I was pregnant with our first child – wondering if I was going to have the baby right there in class."

That experience was followed by some classes at the McGill Conserva-



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After a three decade journey to her degree, Western staffer Debra Hawthorne says she'll be thinking about a lot of people as she crosses the Convocation stage. "Most of all, I will be thinking, 'Here's the dream – it came true,'" she said.

tory.

"It was my dream, originally, to get a music degree from McGill. But it didn't work out that way," said Hawthorne, who was almost ready to shelve her passion. "But it was my husband who said, 'Deb, you know, it's never too late.' I started thinking he was right. Why put off that dream?"

front of a class of 20-year-olds, singing," Hawthorne said of those first few classes. "Oh my gosh, what an experience."

The mother of four and grandmother of six worked her way through steadily, thanks, in part, to the guiding hand of Diane Mills, her academic advisor in Music, who will be "more than happy to see me go."

Juggling family and job throughout her studies, she didn't have the time to fulfill the instrument requirements for a major in Music History. Instead, she pursued a three-year BA with a double minor in Music and Comparative Literature and Culture.

The shift was a blessing, not a disappointment, for this lifelong lover of learning.

"It has been fabulous, and all of the electives, I have just loved them – Astronomy, French, Visual Arts, Classics," she said. "That was actually great. I am interested in so many things it allowed me to expand into new areas."

At one point in her journey, Hawthorne paused to complete a Canadian Institute of Management designation through Continuing Studies. She graduated from that program in 2010.

She credited Western's Education Assistance program, which encourages staff to obtain additional edu-

cation/qualifications by reimbursing tuition costs, for helping her along the way.

"People should take advantage of that. It's such a wonderful thing," she said. "There's always a way to work a course in somewhere – and it doesn't have to be toward a degree."

With academics behind her, she looks to return to performing music – either her clarinet from high school or picking up a stringed instrument. But she has yet to rule out a return to the classroom.

"I have always been interested in real estate – maybe a real estate license, you know, for a fun hobby," she said. **WN**

