

Seniors benefit from going back to school

Learning is a life-long process and helps keep aging minds active

By Erin Pettit

Goffrey Clarke, 75, says he's had enough of school. For the time being he's taking a break from his studies at The University of Western Ontario to pursue other interests.

Clarke is one of a growing number of London seniors who believes going to school is not only for the young. He began a degree in English at the University of Toronto at age 63, when he was only two years away from retiring from his job as a court reporter. Since completing his degree and moving to London, Clarke has dabbled in philosophy, history and modern languages, but maintains

English literature is his preference. When asked what he gets out of taking demanding courses many students would agonize over, Clarke says school has been a labor of love.

"I have found knowledge of history, of people. As a humanist, I have always been interested in these things. Even before going to university I would make the time to read, so I gravitated towards school." Clarke, who is divorced, is conscious of the danger of falling into a state of inactivity when confronted with the prospect of being alone. "The problem with living alone and becoming elderly is that you have to do something with your time." Clarke also credits school in retirement for

giving him relief from a career that was often monotonous.

"Court reporting was a high-tension, mechanical kind of job. When I retired my doctor said this was a turning point, and I should find something that would fascinate me."

For Clarke, opening the doors to literature and history has been nothing short of a miracle. "It kept me alive. The travel got me out of the house, and the young people were revivifying."

Now, as he takes a break from his studies, Clarke will try his hand at writing at home.

Dr. Koli Karunaratne, Director of the Geriatric Psychology Program at the London Psychiatric Hospital, underscores the importance of stimulating our minds as we age. "There is no doubt about it. As we age the brain becomes smaller; it

actually loses volume." Karunaratne says intellectual stimulation helps us by "keeping the circuits active."

"We need to keep making use of our ability to see relationships, to make connections. In doing this, we are also insuring that our days will be more fulfilling."

Western and Fanshawe College offer options for seniors who aren't interested in taking courses for credit. Although there are non-credit courses designed for seniors, such as ones offered by the Society for Learning in Retirement, many seniors sign up for courses other students take.

Marcy DeFebo of Part-Time and Continuing Education at Western says, "Depending on their attitude and where they're at, they could take anything from business to therapeutic touch."

There are also courses offered on-line, which might appeal to seniors who have trouble getting to school. However, DeFebo says more seniors

enjoy coming to school rather than doing it from home. "Something they enjoy about the continuing ed courses is coming out and meeting with other seniors, and sharing ideas."

Seniors pay for credit courses, but get a discount of 50 percent on many. DeFebo says the option of auditing a credit course appeals to many seniors because they can sit in on the course and participate without the pressure of writing the exams.

Fanshawe also offers courses through Part-time and Continuing Education geared to seniors, including computer and fine arts courses. For some non-credit courses Fanshawe offers a 30 percent discount to those over 55.

Registration for part-time courses offered this summer at Western and Fanshawe began in March and runs until courses are full.

Bertie Watts, a retired high-school principal and coordinator of a special learning workshop at Western geared to seniors, says they benefit from intellectual stimulation.

The Society for Learning in Retirement, based in Westminster College, is open to those 55 and older. It costs \$50 to join and accommodates seven to 20 people. During the nine-week workshop, members meet once a week for a day of lectures and discussions. Watts stresses that members are not allowed to be passive observers. They must participate.

Registration for the series called Especially for Seniors is currently underway.