

# These adult students know their goals

By Debora Van Breenk  
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Stella Johnson has little trouble finding her way through a mathematical maze of integers, cubed roots and quadratic equations. She is at home in that world. She is at home here, too.

"Here" is the G. A. Wheable Centre, which today celebrates its first birthday as London's adult education high school.

It's a place where seniors discuss English essays over a cup of coffee. Where toddlers wobble through corridors on the way to day care, their mothers following behind with textbooks under each arm.

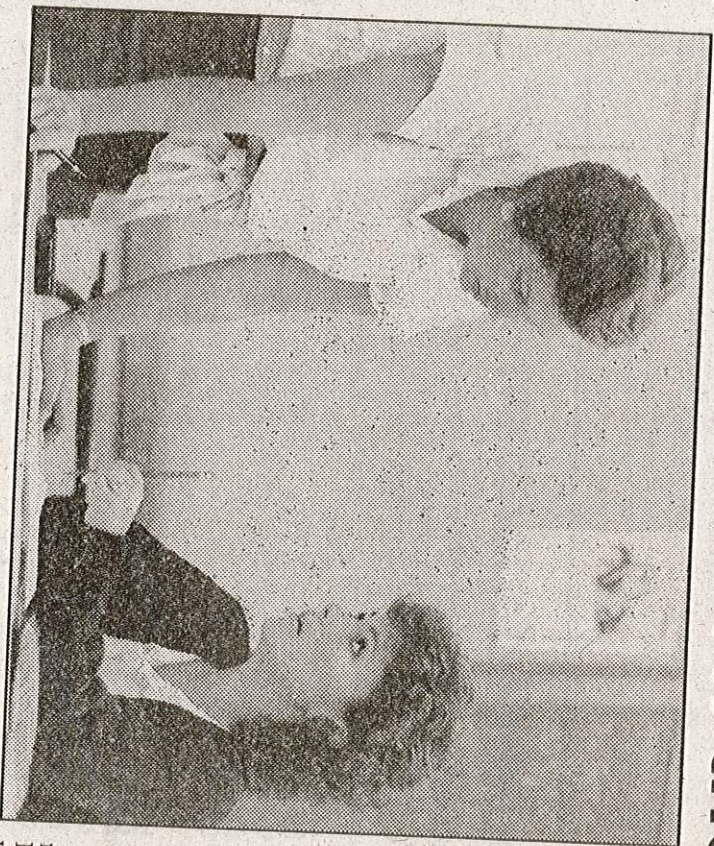
There are no bells to signal the start or end of classes. Students call teachers by their first names.

It's not education heaven — the lessons are rarely easy and many of the 1,257 day students have families and jobs to compete for their attention. But most are determined to graduate.

"I've got goals," said Johnson, 26. "I know what I want and that's a big difference. Even though it will take me six or seven years to get my BA after this and then go to teacher's college. I've just got to go for it."

Illness forced her out of school after Grade 9. She returned briefly to upgrade basic skills before illness put her life on hold for another four years.

In February, she started at Wheable. Now she is taking Grade 12 math and English courses and



Bill Inoside/London Free Press

Teacher Anne Dwyer helps Stella Johnson with her algebra before math class at the G. A. Wheable Centre for adult education. The school is celebrating its first birthday today.

plans to enrol at University of Western Ontario, next fall on her way to becoming a high school math and history teacher.

"I expect so much from myself here. I expect 80s and 90s because that's the only way I'll get into university."

Johnson toyed with enrolling in a regular high school, even attended one close to her London home for two days this year, but missed the company of other adult students.

"This is a place I can feel comfortable. I never wanted to go back to high school to get into university

because I hated the idea of walking into an adolescent high school and going through the same things all over again. Here, we're all in the same boat."

Teachers, she said, treat students as adults. "They're so approachable, it's more like having a friend teaching you how to do something."

The classroom atmosphere is encouraging to teachers, said teacher Anne Dwyer. "There's far more motivation to learn here. Adults work harder and they do their homework. That comes with maturity, I guess, but they know their goals more than most teenagers."

Gord Sharpley works 30-40 hours a week at a fast-food restaurant and studies full-time. He began at Wheable last year. "It was my only recourse left" after 19 years of wandering around the province and the country.

"I'm going to make something of myself. After I get out of this place, I'm going to go through six years of university. I want to be a social worker and help other kids like myself."

Mark Murray hopes to become a millwright after he graduates. He left Wheable when younger teenagers still strolled the corridors and returned this year to finish Grade 12.

"It's a better place than any to come back to. I love this place. When I played football here, we were the kings of the school. Everyone was competing for clothes, friends, trends. That doesn't happen here. We're all here for the same reason — to finish."