

# Profiles of excellence

Champions and  
learners in  
municipal  
workplace  
programs

Canadian  
Association of  
Municipal  
Administrators



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# Acknowledgements

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We want to extend our appreciation to the Municipal Partnerships Project Steering Committee. Led by Patricia Nutter, the committee is composed of the following dedicated people: Michelle O'Brien (Chair), Sylvia Sioufi (CUPE), Ron Penney (CAMA), Wendy DesBrisay (Movement for Canadian Literacy), Pamela Crookall (City of Ottawa), Wil Kelly (City of Ottawa CUPE), and Viviane Antunes (HRSDC). Their encouragement was vital to this initiative.

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We hope this group of profiles will increase awareness of the literacy and essential skills challenges that many municipal workers face, and the role that workplace education programs can play in helping them participate more actively in the workplace, home, and community.

Owen Tobert  
President of CAMA

Barry Carroll  
Past President of CAMA

June 2008



# Introduction

CAMA is proud to introduce you to five champions of municipal workplace learning and five learners. Our champions are municipal managers who inspired their staff as well as Council members to take up the challenge of supporting adult learning. The learners are municipal workers whose accomplishments have helped others to return to learning. These five workers now serve on CAMA's national Learners' Council for workplace learning and literacy.

Champions carry the banner and light the way for new initiatives. They are the driving force that ignites others and ensures that the seeds of knowledge and skills development will take root and grow. Our champions saw educational opportunities for workers that would open up new worlds for each one in their personal and work lives, and in their communities. They offered the organizational support that is so needed if a town or city is to ensure a program's success. They worked hard to set up joint committees, to provide time and resources for committee work, and, in the end, to recognize all who were involved. As leaders, they took on the challenge of getting the program accepted so it could benefit the municipal workplace and all its employees.

Municipal staff and union executives transform a vision into an operating program. Their joint commitment and the work they do together make workplace learning a reality for workers. Their dedication takes them through weeks of planning for needs assessments, of making sure people know about the program, and of making courses happen on time, as promised. Their ongoing attention to the needs and goals of employees maintains the momentum of workplace education programs.

Our learners have done more than achieve their own educational goals. They have helped to develop workplace learning and they have inspired co-workers to get involved in learning. Each one has their own story of finding the courage to overcome obstacles. They all share the pure joy of reaching personal learning goals and they all continue to pursue new opportunities for work and education. As members of the Learners' Council, these five men and women will work nationally to raise the profile of adult learning in municipal workplaces and to promote and encourage workers across the country to rediscover themselves through learning.

CAMA invites you to get to know our champions and learners. You will be inspired!

## Champion: Mary Walsh

“Personally, I’ve always been an active learner and I love a challenge,” says Mary Walsh. She sees her role on the Workplace Self Improvement Program as a “natural progression” of her work in the Department of Human Resources with the City of St. John’s. As Manager of Employee Development, Mary has been the management rep on the joint committee since 2004. St. John’s was one of CAMA’s pilot sites for this type of program. In 2009, the committee will celebrate its 10th anniversary.

When the committee began its work in 1997, employees were facing the effects of municipal cutbacks, downsizing, and early retirements. Workers were being given extra duties and more responsibilities, many involving more paperwork. In the first needs assessment the following year, employees said they wanted to improve their writing and computer skills. To help people overcome any fears of returning to a learning environment, the committee ensured that programs would be voluntary, non-threatening, held in comfortable settings, and would follow a strict policy of confidentiality. As a CAMA pilot project, these features of the program help to set national standards for municipal workplace education.



### Successful programs

The committee’s first program, in 1999, was Writing in the Workplace. It attracted about 60 people and ran for two years. Later courses in computers, keyboarding, and GED kept the committee busy during the seasons when programs were offered. About 160 people have come to computer courses, showing how hungry people were to learn and update these types of skills. “Even though there are still employees who do not use computers at work,” Mary says, “they use them at home and they felt computer skills were needed for self improvement.” While the city’s overall training mandate is work-related, Mary stresses that “the municipality recognizes that factors outside work can impact work life.” For example, the committee extended the GED program to

the families of employees. “People appreciated that inclusion...because of their concern about young people in their families.”

As the only management representative now sitting on the committee, Mary helps to keep that important link with senior management strong and active. Working with committee members from four union locals, she is “a voice to request funding and program support.” She oversees the courses and works closely with the external trainer for the program. Right now, the committee is looking at the hiring process for trainers and is planning to set up new ways to manage this.

### Learners as champions

Mary recalls with pleasure the pride that several employees showed when they received their GEDs. “We openly acknowledged their efforts and it was a great validation for them. They became big champions for other people.” At that time, “there wasn’t a big uptake for GED but now we may get more participants and family members, too,” thanks to the way learners have “sold” it to others. People made sacrifices around family time and personal life to get more education. Those who made the commitment and worked at it have been very successful, she says.

The committee, City councillors, and management celebrated the success of the most recent graduates from the keyboarding program. The real bonus, says Mary, is when the workplace can celebrate the success and acknowledge the efforts of all participants.

### Time to revitalize

During this last decade, the Workplace Self Improvement Program has opened up new learning options for workers. Some say that it gave them self-confidence and they are now more likely to take part in other training. They can handle paperwork more easily, and they can encourage and help their children by using some of their new skills.

Mary feels it’s time to revitalize the committee, do another needs assessment to find out what people want, and to try some new approaches. “The average age of the City’s workforce is 47. Maybe we need to market our programs differently and get more people on the ground involved so that we get our message out to the larger group.”

Time is the most precious resource in making this type of program work. “When a program is running, that’s all the committee can handle.” Right now, many of the committee’s members are also working with other city groups on wellness and Lunch and Learn activities. Mary feels these links with other parts of the workplace are vital for the future of workplace learn-

“We really do recognize and care about the whole picture, the impact of people’s whole lives on work and vice versa.”

–Mary Walsh

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“You can knock  
down any  
roadblock.  
Whatever age,  
you can do it.”  
—Terry Bennett

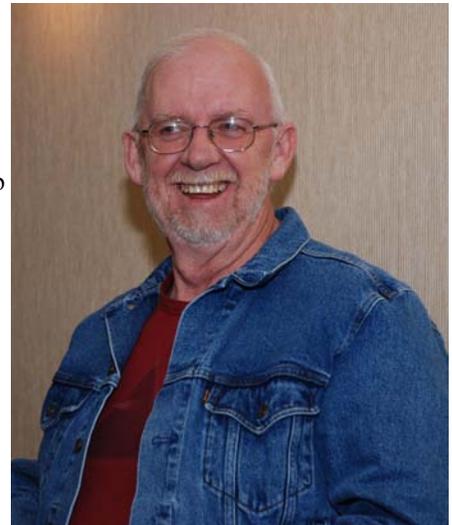
ing. But time and people are needed. “We need time and support more than we need money. We could use a broader scope of members to attract more people to our programs and bring in new ideas.”

To improve programs, Mary suggests that essential skills be made part of the workplace learning program. This type of integrated approach requires a closer look at how courses are organized and how they can include essential skills elements. The committee has already discussed short and intense Saturday courses for professional updates. Mary also feels it’s time to use the City’s own trainers, or peer instructors, to offer short life skills courses such as carpentry and plumbing at convenient times, such as on weekends.

It’s the lull before the storm. Newfoundlanders know all about that!

## Learner: Terry Bennett

“In 1997 when Patricia Nutter with CAMA first came to St. John’s to set up a literacy program, I said: ‘If you think you’ll get something like this started, good luck to you.’” Terry Bennett describes himself at that time as “one of the most negative people there.” Once St. John’s became a pilot project and programs started in 1999, Terry was fully on board. He attended every course and continues to be a strong union promoter of workplace learning.



Terry made a dramatic exit from school at 16, jumping over the counter in the principal’s office to avoid physical punishment. He picked up one of the many short-term jobs that were available at the time and never gave school or his high school diploma a second thought. “It wasn’t something I was thinking about when I left school.” He started working for the City in 1977 as a temporary employee for the Canada Summer Games. By 1982, he was full-time in water and sewers and has been lucky enough to “move around to different departments and never get bored.” Terry is a first class operator of heavy equipment with 12 years in Parks and Recreation and, since 1995, with the streets department. “We take pride in what we do. Everything is out in the open and everyone sees us because we’re outside workers. We get a lot of good comments from people. When the City used to do surveys of the public, we got 2.9 out of 3.0. Nice to hear all that good stuff.”

### Jumping into learning

Terry also takes pride in his personal commitment and efforts in workplace learning. One of the first courses that the St. John’s Workplace Self Improvement Program offered was Writing in the Workplace and Terry was

there. "After being out of school at 16, this course really helped me." Terry took computer training and keyboarding and in 2005, he earned his GED. "I'm very proud of that." Going back to school again was a challenge, "a bit scary at first, but a good facilitator made it okay."

Union work and workplace learning are linked for Terry, an outspoken advocate for both. The computer course "helped me tremendously with union work" and he represents CUPE Local 569 on the Workplace Self Improvement Program. Terry has served the union membership for 20 years, first as a shop steward and then going on to "work every position on the executive except president." Since 2006, he has been the chief shop steward, "policing the collective agreement with the City." Twelve hours a week, he's in the union office, reading through documents, discussing union policy, and writing up reports such as grievances and appeals filled with all the details required to protect workers. Currently, he also sits on committees for pension, grievances, and the Employee and Family Assistance Program.

While Terry has never been shy about speaking his mind, his learning over the last 10 years has taken him into new territory. "I never thought of going near a computer. I was afraid." Now, Terry says, "My self-confidence is high and my self-

esteem is huge." He is also proud of what the committee has been able to offer and of his co-workers who put in the time and effort. "We put 160 people through the computer course; it was great...just when computers were coming into trucks and equipment." The committee usually offers its programs when the weather is good, to avoid losing shift workers. "In the middle of the summer, we were studying from 6:00 to 9:30 p.m. and absentees were about nil." He also credits the City of St. John's for "being good about training" and City Council for funding the program directly for the last several years.

### **Working hard to learn and grow**

As a member of the CAMA Learners' Council, Terry's history and involvement in the workplace learning program locally and nationally gives him a distinct perspective. He honours the hard work that went into organizing the pilot projects and supporting the growth of successful programs. "I remember when we first met in Moncton for the pilots, we were amazed at what the Moncton program was doing." He looks back on how the whole CAMA project has expanded: "It's huge—more than 260 programs! I'm proud to be part of it." The Learners' Council brings together representatives from across the country to foster a sense of working together. "When you're isolated, you don't have the same feeling." Terry says the first meeting of the group in Ottawa "was an emotional time for me—four other people doing the exact same thing that I was doing. It's a proud moment for all of us to be on the

Learners' Council."

Terry wants to get the message out to other workers to join a workplace learning program. "You can knock down any roadblock. Whatever age, you can do it. It's never too late to start." Once you've started, never stop. "Stay involved with literacy. Read a pamphlet, read a book, read signs. Buy something new and read the book that comes with it."

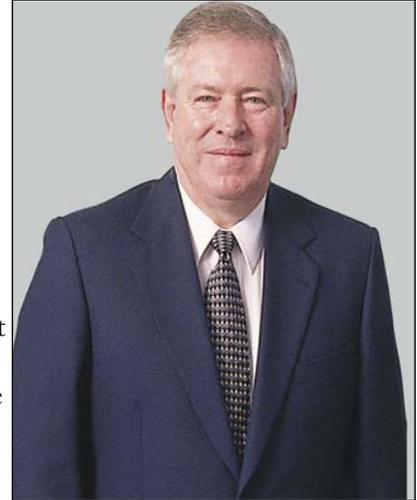
### **Changing places in the future**

In another year Terry can retire but his interest and involvement in City affairs will remain strong. In fact, Terry says he's thinking seriously about running for councillor-at-large in the City. "I'm going to put my name forward in the next couple of years for electoral politics. If I get elected, I can retire and move down to City Hall."

"Then, I'll put all my faith in the City staff!" he jokes.

## Champion: Al Strang

Al Strang, the recently-retired City Manager of Moncton, was president of CAMA when the first pilot projects for municipal workplace education were proposed in 1996. He offered Moncton as a pilot site although he wasn't quite sure just what the project involved. "Later," says Al, "I became a champion" along with the "great people in Human Resources" like Kathy DeWitt who has "kept the candle lit" during the last decade.



The City of Moncton has won more than 12 awards for its unique programs, outstanding learners, and dedicated educators. CAMA has recognized Moncton's commitment, the way it built partnerships, designed unique programs, and honoured both learners' success and teachers' dedication. Both the Conference Board of Canada and Canada Post gave Moncton awards for business leadership in literacy programs. As of 2007, 738 people have been part of Moncton's program and 20 workers have earned their GEDs. Al is proud of the program which serves so many employees every year.

### How it started

The program started out like many others. It offered reading, writing, math, basic computer training, and GED preparation. Personal development courses, such as how to prepare an income tax form and basic parenting, attracted more people. Effective leadership, effective speaking skills, and French were added to the program in response to employee feedback. In fact, the City has a full-time French teacher to meet the demands for language training in this officially bilingual city. French skills are highly desired by many in the workplace and they are required in certain jobs. Moncton's workplace learning program uses both official languages and addresses essential skills in both English and French on-the-job and in the community.

The City's workplace learning program has always involved families in its options for ongoing learning. Al says this policy has "made one spouse more willing to bring another." During the long winter of 2008, spouses often

helped to get their partners to class after long snow removal shifts. The family policy has given job opportunities to spouses, many of whom improved their skills and became more employable. Some spouses returned to the workforce; others moved into better paying jobs. This policy also attracted sons and daughters to continuing education and was the City's outreach effort to the community.

### Joint effort makes an impact

When Al first brought the idea for workplace education to the city, the Human Resources department and the two locals (CUPE and the City Hall Employees' Association) did the planning for that early pilot project. The joint nature of the project was essential, Al feels, because "it wasn't something management was laying on." As a champion for all these years, he has always made sure there has been enough funding to continue offering choices for ongoing learning. Many people have learned "computer skills without embarrassment" and earned their GEDs. "It's an extra boost for people to become involved" in their city, their union, their families, and their communities. For the City of Moncton, this level of involvement in lifelong learning has given workers the skills and confidence they need to get promotions and be more active in their workplace.

### Success starts here

Al feels the "real key to success is getting good teachers." A few teachers like Gayle Constable have been with the Moncton program since the pilot project began. Gayle won a CAMA award in 2007 for helping people get active in lifelong learning and achieve their goals. Al sees Gayle and other teachers who have stayed with the program for a long time as "exceptional." He describes them as "unique people who care."

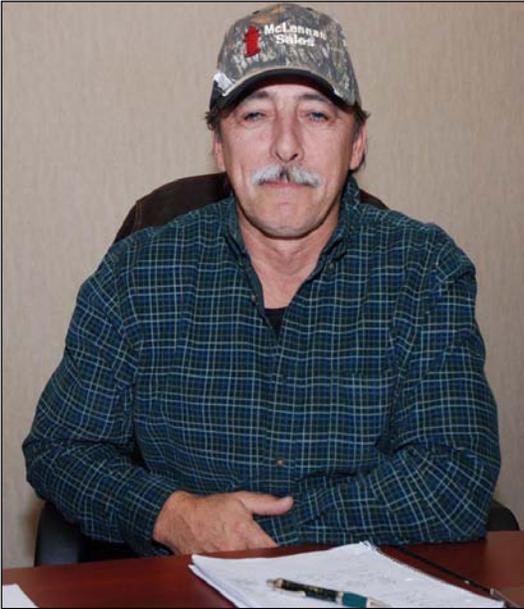
Al's advice for senior managers who are thinking about or just starting a workplace learning program is as follows:

- Opportunities have no limits. "Don't put blinders on."
- Be open to new ideas and new ways of thinking about learning.
- Involve all your bargaining units.
- Invite all levels of staff to take part in these learning opportunities.

"I don't see an end to what we're doing," says Al. "Enthusiasm is infectious."

"The Workplace Education Program opened up people's thinking top to bottom." –Al Strang

# Learner: Robert Melanson



Robert Melanson will always remember the winter of 2008—one snowstorm after another, plowing the roads six days a week through a brutal winter, and then retiring before the snow melted after 33 years of service with the City of Moncton. “I always enjoyed what I was doing here from labouring on cement crews to driving trucks and plowing. I go and do a job and finish it. I can see what I’ve done afterwards.”

Robert began work with the City as a casual labourer in 1975 and later got a full-time job as a truck driver and snow plow operator. When the City started its workplace education programs as a CAMA pilot project in 1998, Robert was one of the first to sign up. By that time, all municipal work was demanding more documentation, certifications, and greater use of technology. Robert knew he wanted to improve his reading and writing, but the right program hadn’t come along. “At first, I could read a bit but couldn’t write much. With workplace learning I could write and explain what was wrong with the truck.”

## Taking on the learning challenge

As a school-age child, Robert had straddled both English and French, had a hard time learning, and left school after Grade 7. “When you don’t know how to read and write, you stay in the background,” Robert says. The message he sent out to people was, “don’t look at me.” Getting back into education changed the way he lived his life. “As I went along, I got more guts. I used to hold back but, now, I’m right out front. It’s really different.”

As in many workplaces, promotions within the City required high school completion. Robert challenged himself to get his Grade 12 equivalency certificate (GED) and overcame many obstacles along his six year path. Juggling

“I don’t know where I’d be if I hadn’t done this learning.”

—Robert Melanson

work schedules and long shifts, he kept up, passing the five exams even after new GED requirements forced him to retake some of them. He achieved that first significant educational goal—getting his GED—in 2005.

“The GED opened my eyes to a lot of things,” he says. It helped him approach work and life with more confidence. With his GED in hand, he applied for and got a temporary foreman’s job. As an instructor in the driver training program, he helped develop a new training manual. He enrolled in computer courses and continued learning and using these tools. Robert earned the CAMA Learner Achievement Award in 2006 and was invited to join the Learners’ Council in 2007. “Nothing scares me now,” he says. “I’m really looking forward to my future.”

#### “I can tell my story”

As a member of the Learners’ Council, Robert hopes to use some of his retirement time to “talk to people about where I started and where I am now.” In his job with the City, he promoted workplace education and attended conferences as a learner representative. Now, he would like to talk to more people “about how I felt and why I couldn’t learn.” Robert says he used to have a hard time remembering what he read until his teacher explained that reading word-for-word blocked him from getting the full meaning. “Now when I read, I just assume I know what I’m reading and I understand everything.”

Robert admits he was nervous about attending a national meeting with other members of the Learners’ Council. “I didn’t know what to expect. But I found out what CAMA wanted and felt more relaxed. The whole meeting put me at ease.” The other Council members had their stories to tell and, as Robert says, “It’s a lot easier when you talk to somebody who’s been in your shoes.”

#### Work after retirement

What’s next, now that he has retired? “Anything and everything. I’d jump into absolutely anything.” In fact, Robert is starting a new full-time career. He has set up his own construction and renovation business, Sunco Inc., and has already built five homes and fixed others. Robert did all the paperwork for incorporation and designed the logo and business cards. “I wouldn’t have spoken to anyone before—lawyers and bank managers.”

Robert feels more than ready to take on one exciting challenge after another. “I’m not scared of anything at all. I’ve never been like this before.” Congratulations, Robert, and best wishes in your second career.

## Champion: Debbie LaVallee

Debbie LaVallee puts persistence at the top of the advice she would give to municipal managers who are thinking about starting workplace learning programs. Thanks to Debbie's firm belief in the benefits of essential skills education, the City of Kingston agreed to set up the Joint Employee Education and Development (JEED) committee in 2005. As Manager of Employee Services in the Human Resources (HR) department, Debbie had been working toward that goal since 2002. She approached senior management twice before she got the go-ahead.

When the first plan for a workplace learning initiative was not approved, Debbie, with the support of the City's top manager, joined with CAMA to host a pilot workshop for municipalities in the Kingston area. Labour and management representatives who came to the event drafted goals, principles, and terms of reference for joint committees. Debbie recalls, "It was something new that probably we hadn't thought about—the need for basic skills or essential skills. Instead, we had targeted people with Grade 12 and university grads for our training." Even after this workshop and the joint effort that made it happen, the proposed



idea was again postponed. Debbie and her committed colleagues developed the project in more detail, added more stakeholders, and communicated widely about the benefits and outcomes of workplace essential skills. "We saw we needed to help people who were in the workplace longer. We heard that older employees were frustrated. They couldn't do the job because they didn't have the education. We got in and decided to address literacy."

The plan that finally brought success involved making the JEED committee part of the Human Resources goals for 2005. When those goals were approved, committee planning with management, CUPE Local 109 representatives, and several HR trainers began. "We saw the value in getting this going as opposed to offering more for employees with higher education." At the start, JEED's focus was on courses that would give people new skills and credentials, namely GED, computers, and keyboarding.

## Change does not happen quickly

Looking back on her role in setting up workplace learning, Debbie admits it was a “frustrating process, long and drawn out” but rewarding in the end. “Getting people interested and keeping them interested” was difficult. “This initiative brought to the forefront the hidden issues that people hadn’t talked about.” So, Debbie says, we “...had to make a case for it because, for many people, it wasn’t a priority.” In fact, it wasn’t even on their radar.

Debbie continued as a champion for workplace essential skills by co-chairing the committee and keeping JEED’s learning options visible. At all stages, Debbie says, “You have to put the effort into it and it’s not an easy task.”

## Impacts for workers and the community

The City’s workplace learning program has, above all, raised awareness about the need for essential skills. “It’s not the hidden or taboo issue anymore.” Relations between labour and management have improved and “people are working together to benefit employees.” Because it’s a joint effort, labour is a full partner and can contribute ideas such as peer training, a common way to deliver basic education in labour programs. JEED set up peer training for computer courses and peer tutoring for the Grade 12 program.

In a new and unique partnership, the City and the Limestone Board of Education have set up a maturity credit system. It offers people credits toward a high school diploma for the skills, training, and experience they have. The City of Kingston was the first employer in the city to work with a school board to set up a process for employees to gain their Grade 12 diplomas on-the-job. This flexible program allows city employees access to tutors at night classes and gives them credit for their work experience.

Rob Snyder, a CAMA award winner, was the first person to graduate from the program. Debbie stills finds that the “commitment and dedication of learners is impressive.” Even when they didn’t get a diploma, “people tried and gained something from the program.”

## Follow this good advice

Debbie stresses the need for persistence in providing these basic learning opportunities. Work with your union and try different approaches to get support from your municipality. “Unions have a powerful voice and can be very effective with senior managers and gaining acceptance.” Other good advice:

- Don’t get discouraged. Work with people who believe in the project. “It wasn’t hard to convince our HR team of the value of being on the committee.”
- Do your homework. One of the committee’s first jobs may be to do

“It’s twice as rewarding when it’s been so challenging.”

–Debbie LaVallee

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a needs assessment to find out what programs your employees want.

- Be creative and offer programs that suit your employees.

### Planning for the future

After the hard work of gaining support, setting up the committee, and offering a first cycle of courses, Debbie gave her committee work to other colleagues in 2006. The JEED committee is now reorganizing and getting ready to offer another cycle of courses. The current members are inviting new people to join the committee and they are reviewing their original needs assessment so they can offer more learning opportunities to employees in the fall of 2008.

## Learner: Rob Snyder

Rob Snyder had a good reason to revamp his resume in 2007: he earned his Grade 12 diploma and won a Learner Achievement award from CAMA. With his diploma and his new resume, Rob is ready to think about new possibilities for work and life. “I feel complete now. I’m more confident. I don’t feel like I have to look up to people.”



Rob has worked with the City of Kingston for almost 22 years as a bus driver/operator. He enjoys the job and the people. “I learn a lot from the people I meet and I get to help them out” along the way, Rob says. “It’s satisfying—working for the public. They know you are working for them as well as with them.”

### Achieving that big goal

Rob left high school to go to work. Then he got married, had children and somehow, “I never got back to education.” Not in the formal sense, but he “always stayed active in education mostly through union courses and committee work. I always wanted to finish my education. My two brothers got their Grade 12 and I was the only one who didn’t.” Then, in 2006, the opportunity arose to get his high school diploma through a unique program set up by the City’s Joint Employee Education and Development (JEED) Committee and the Limestone Board of Education. The program gives adults special credits called “maturity credits” for the skills, training, and work experience they bring to their high school equivalency work. Rob was the first proud graduate of this partnership program.

Earning the credits required determination, intensive study, and sacrifices. First, Rob found out he had to get double the number of credits because his last year was not counted or on file when he left school. Then, he taught himself the computer skills he needed to do research on the Internet and prepare his assignments. This time around he was able to use his knowledge and experience gained from life and work. For example, in one assignment, he created a brochure and newsletter to inform the public about the City’s transit system. He worked full-time days and went to school and studied at night, and on the weekends. No time for fun. But with the strong support of his family, he completed all the required credits in 10 months.

“I’m so glad I did it. The jump wasn’t that big. It was really only a baby step.”

“The jump wasn’t that big. It was really only a baby step.” —Rob Snyder

## Learning along the way

Looking back, Rob says he never stopped learning during all his working years. The union courses were a positive learning experience. They gave him an opportunity to learn about unions and their work in the company of people who had different educational backgrounds. Rob served on several committees as a union representative over the years: the Transit-Advisory Uniform Committee, the Health and Safety Committee, and the Social Committee. He served as a chief steward, steward, unit rep, and union hall cleaner. He transferred learning from one position and one committee to another. It all added up to an active career in representing people and advocating for fair policies.

Knowing he would have to put all his time and energy into study, Rob resigned from committee work when he started his Grade 12 program. But, no one was going to let that last too long. He is now serving as Secretary-Treasurer for the Social Committee and as a member of CAMA’s Learners’ Council.

Rob’s success in getting his high school diploma was a turning point in how he viewed himself, his future, and his career. With new confidence, he is “ready to speak up” and tackle the demands of any new situation. As a member of the Learners’ Council, he has already encouraged people who are interested in returning to school. One co-worker is close to getting his diploma and another has just enrolled. Rob also wants to help more people get access to union education programs. Both the Human Resources Department and CUPE Local 109 will make good use of Rob’s advocacy and support. He is looking forward to representing the Learners’ Council by speaking to people about the value of education, getting more people involved in JEED activities, and helping the City be an active player in workplace learning.

## Looking to the future

The future could hold many different possibilities for Rob. He’s “ready for a change of pace, a job that might be more physical, something different.” He is now qualified to apply for municipal jobs that would have been closed to him in the past.

On the home front, he has been building a hunting cabin with his children over the last year. “I’ve had that property for 30 years and now we’re doing something with it.” In fact, thanks to his education program, Rob succeeded in getting his hunting license again, after it had expired. There will be plenty of family activity in that cabin. Rob and his wife are taking care of an almost two-year-old niece for awhile and he also hopes to spend time with his two grandchildren. “I missed most of my kids’ growing up because of work and I don’t want to miss these years with my grandkids.”

When retirement comes along, Rob sees himself staying active in learning and in helping others. He says he’ll get involved with the retired municipal employees and try to help out at the Seniors’ Council. Long before that is a special trip to Ireland. Enjoy the Emerald Isle!

## Champion: Rhonda Tone

Rhonda Tone, the Manager of Human Resource Development for the City of Winnipeg, knows full well the literacy demands of the 21st century workplace. “We assume literacy at a very high level for our current jobs. For instance, we assume most employees will have basic computer literacy.

It can be very intimidating. It’s important to help people overcome their fears and/or concerns so they can work on their skills to enhance how they do their work. It’s not easy.” As co-chair of the City-CUPE Joint Education Fund, Rhonda has been working with the union co-chair to make it easier for city employees to access the learning they need.

### Strong leadership from the beginning

Back in 2001, 10 per cent of the employees who answered a City-CUPE survey said they had concerns about reading and writing. Being an avid supporter and sponsor of learning, Rhonda was struck by the high numbers and had to ask why. The answers were not hard to find: new literacy demands from increased technology on the job, more written reports required of foremen, and a huge information increase that all staff had to respond to. Employees



“understood that physical skills were not enough anymore.”

The Joint Education Fund has provided many types of learning opportunities including Essential Skills, one of the core programs. In 2000, the collective agreement between the City of Winnipeg and CUPE Local 500 included \$3 million for education and training. Since then, it has negotiated several letters of understanding to decide how and where to spend training dollars. The Essential Skills Program, with a current three-year budget of \$132,500, is also supported by a City employee who is a member of CUPE Local 500. The program began with reading, writing, math, and GED preparation. It grew to include pilot programs such as English as a second language, basic

computers, communication, study skills, accounting, and personal development (for example, Writing your life story and a book club).

### Recognition and support for learning

Rhonda has championed essential skills education from the management level by advocating for ongoing funding and recognizing the achievements of learners. “Annually, we celebrate this group of learners. The celebration is consistently a huge success and visibly demonstrates the City’s and union’s support for this type of learning.” Rhonda also enabled employees to have all of their essential skills courses registered and tracked in the City’s Enterprise Learning System, PeopleSoft. “We never recorded any of the essential skills learning until this past year (2007). People are now given recognition and documentation that they took essential skills courses. It validates their learning and demonstrates its importance.”

Workers themselves know how important this program has been to them. Rhonda says “people are more confident. They understand how they can achieve and how they can contribute.” From passing a certification test to reading to a grandchild—essential skills programs have helped people change how they work and live. “There are many stories of individuals who are so proud of their learning and feel good about what they’ve done.” At the corporate level, essential skills programs have helped to support employees’ upgrading as more and more duties require licensing and certification to meet technology and accountability demands.

### Advice from “the pro”

Work with your union – While Rhonda has been a strong leader and advocate for learning in her management position, being the Fund’s co-chair gave her the chance to work closely with CUPE Local 500’s co-chair. “Working with the union has been a learning experience for us. Kathy Todd, the first CUPE coordinator for the Essential Skill’s program, made a huge contribution with her work. She’s a real champion for workplace literacy.”

Understand your employees’ literacy levels – “Find a tool for your committee to use so that people can tell you what they need and want,” says Rhonda. What types of literacy issues are they concerned about? What do they want to learn? Use the answers to these questions to find ways to support people and make a difference in their lives.

Generate interest in learning – When a City councillor asked Rhonda why the City should fund courses that were not work-related, she replied: “There’s a benefit in getting people interested in learning. That interest

“There are many stories of individuals who are so proud of their learning and feel good about what they’ve done.”

–Rhonda Tone

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spreads.” Writing your life story can be the first step to passing a certification exam for your job.

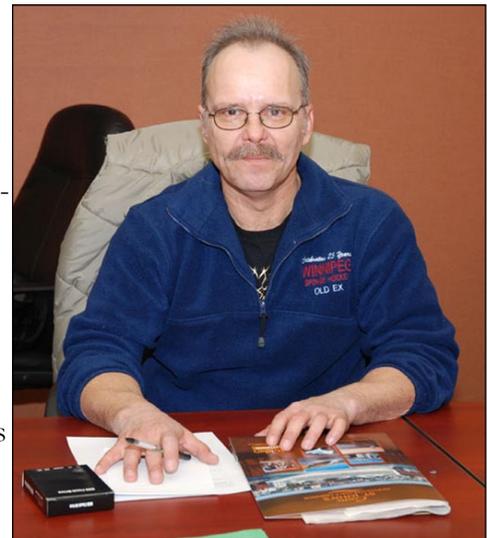
### What’s next?

Last year, fewer employees used essential skills programs. Rhonda feels the City and CUPE need to go back to employees and find out what programs would be most helpful to them now. For instance, “is there a work unit that needs support as the water workers did in the past?”

Rhonda would also like to raise the credibility of the essential skills program—make it a more normal part of the range of training opportunities that the City offers. By doing so, everyone will understand that all learning and development are positive both for the organization and for its employees.

## Learner: Bill Bailey

“One dream has come true—becoming permanent.” On February 18, 2008, Bill Bailey moved into a permanent job as a foreman in Insect Control with the City of Winnipeg. Until then, Bill had worked for the City for 22 years, but only in seasonal and temporary positions as an outside worker. The Essential Skills program has played an important role in boosting his skills, confidence, and ability to achieve his personal goals.



Bill has always been up front about what he knows and where he needs help. “I don’t hide anything about my reading and writing and they know me and what I can do. I met all the minimum requirements for the foreman’s job,” he says proudly. He enjoyed his last job in maintenance for the same department because “it was always something different every day. There are so many different machines. I was always up for the challenge.” Now, as foreman, he knows he’ll be learning new skills: how to deal with co-workers and with the public. “I’ll be dealing with complaints from the public. How to handle a situation when a person starts yelling at the crew.” He will also have to learn how to hook up the computers inside the trucks and make sure they are in correct working order. Bill feels excited, ready, and able to take on these new challenges.

### On the learning track

Back in 2001, Bill was not the same worker and learner that he is today. Reading and writing were difficult and technology was a hurdle. His six

week lay off that year proved to be beneficial because he got involved in the Essential Skills program in the evenings. “I was never bored and it was on my own time. I was happier to go to school at night and not take a spot for someone who had a longer layoff.”

“Improving my reading skills was the big thing for me,” says Bill. “I’m 100 per cent better at reading than I was. I’m still working at it and the dictionary helps when I don’t get the words.” Bill can now tackle those technical manuals, the Safety Talk bulletins (which every worker has to read and sign), job announcements, and all the written documentation associated with his work. He says his writing is also improving—“just a little behind my reading.” In fact he had just finished a four week writing course when he got his job promotion. The computer courses he took will be put to good use as a foreman: e-mail, spreadsheets, Excel. He has had his computer books at home but now he’ll be taking them back to work.

In 2004, CAMA recognized Bill’s commitment and success with the Learner Achievement Award. Being on the learning track continues to pay off. “I had to take tests for some jobs and my learning helped me get through the tests. Everyone has to be certified for a lot of things now like forklift and propane use.”

Personally, Bill has also seen the benefits of more education. “I’m reading to my grandkids! I can read letters and e-mails that come to me and I don’t have to bother the rest of my family.” His confidence continues to “get better and better...my confidence level is high. I’m getting through stuff instead of being left behind. I’m proud of myself and my family is, too.”

### Helping others get the same chance

Bill was invited to join the CAMA Learners’ Council when it was formed in 2007. In this role, he would like to talk to co-workers to “show them there’s a good side to learning and to try to get them to believe in themselves.” On a bigger scale, Bill is hoping that some new programs will start up thanks to the efforts of the Learners’ Council. “If we could get a program started somewhere, that would be the biggest thrill. Opening up somebody’s eyes to how these programs help.”

Bill feels strongly that positive reinforcement is key to helping people get hooked on learning. Some good advice for future learners:

“If you’re already thinking about taking a program, you’ve taken the first step. Go for it. Don’t listen to people who are negative. I would never have gotten as far as I did if I had listened to negative people. All it takes is one positive person going for you to help you take that first step. The rest will fall into place.”

The next big learning goal for Bill is his GED. He’ll be learning right beside his colleagues and inspiring them every step of the way.

“Learning is an ongoing process, like everybody’s life.”

—Bill Bailey

## Champions: Dave Gourlay and Josy Burrough

For years, Dave Gourlay, the now-retired City Manager for Grande Prairie, nurtured a strong belief in lifelong learning but struggled with how he could help the City's outside workers. "That's where new opportunities lay," he recalls as he reflects on how he struck gold in 2002. "The efforts of CUPE Local 787 to offer learning resonated with me and I was moved by the testimonials at that year's CAMA conference." He was well aware that employees knew the people who were having difficulty and that managers and supervisors did not. During the next month, Dave took what he had learned from CUPE and CAMA and began setting up a workplace learning committee for Grande Prairie.



Dave Gourlay and his wife, Marg, at Dave's retirement party.

### Getting started, with help

He first identified a few key people who were open to new ideas, to new ways of reaching goals, and to working with their peers. He challenged them to set up a committee that shared their interests in opening up learning opportunities, especially for peer learning. Dave also made two important commitments to staff: any winner of a CAMA award would go the conference to receive the award in person and anyone who applied for a learning opportunity would get funding.

The first person Dave approached was Josy Burrough, then President of CUPE local 787 and now Parks Manager and co-chair of the Workplace Learning Committee. Josy also credits CAMA's regional literacy conference in 2005 as the spur for change. "That conference really helped us broaden our definition of literacy to include essential skills. It opened our eyes. It's not just reading, writing, and math and it's not just workplace. It goes beyond that." In fact, the Workplace Learning Committee has offered face-to-face

communication, computer and income tax courses, courses on digital equipment (cameras, phones, iPods), bookkeeping, and environmental awareness, along with GED. All this happened in its first two years!

### The impacts of a culture of learning

Along with formal learning, the committee has found that informal and entertaining learning generates a lot of interest among staff and in the community. It has worked with other groups to sponsor the Municipal Olympic Games, two successful Christmas card contests for children of the City of Grande Prairie and Aquatera Utilities Inc. employees, and partnerships that offer Learn at Lunch programs. All these efforts have advanced learning and literacy and have raised awareness about lifelong learning. “We’re creating a culture of learning,” says Josy, and “people are now asking for training and taking courses that are not requirements for their job but because they have interest in them and want to continue learning.”

Dave also sees a significant impact of the program on individuals. “It’s made personal development and the personal performance plan much more valuable. People know they can accomplish their goals through education. Just about every job has a tech change aspect to it now. A few small projects helped people see the connection between personal development and their jobs.” Others have successfully changed their career paths.

A learning culture also impacts the municipality as whole, especially in its succession planning. Dave says workplace learning has helped Grande Prairie “develop its own resources from within. People are making a commitment of time and significant personal sacrifice to get the education they want. People see learning as valued now.” And, Josy adds, “the most direct benefit is that people are not afraid to learn.” “There’s that direct link between the economy and workforce learning. As technology changes, we have to keep up with it.”

According to Dave, “the ideal state will be when the dollars don’t meet the demands, and we’re getting close to that.” Grande Prairie budgets “2.25 per cent of salaries for learning, in excess of \$1,000 a person per year.” In 2008, \$778,000 is set aside for learning and development.

### If you’re just getting started...

Dave and Josy both know how important the support of senior management is for successful programming. Likewise, union support is essential. Grande Prairie first set up its joint committee with CUPE Local 787. A year later, the firefighters’ union (GPPFA Local 2770) joined in. As the commit-

“As people learn,  
their appetite  
for learning  
increases.”

–Dave Gourlay

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tee asked different employee groups to sit on the committee, they agreed. For Josy, “it’s important to include our promoters in decision making,” to strengthen the committee.

If you’re just getting started, Dave and Josy offer this advice:

- Be patient and keep at it. Setting up workplace learning doesn’t happen overnight. Dave had to approach the City twice to get the go-ahead for the committee and its programs.

- Start with a group of people who are keen to open up learning opportunities and make sure you do an organizational needs assessment.

- Get started, no matter how small. Keep moving and “don’t worry about scoring a home run,” says Dave. Small projects grow and you can make a difference in a lot of people’s lives.

- Recognize and celebrate learning.



Josy Burrough

#### What about the future?

The Grande Prairie workplace learning committee, with two highly successful years to celebrate, is looking for new ways to attract and engage employees. The committee plans to expand the way it works with regional colleges, to offer more variety and higher level courses. For example, Northern Lakes College is helping the City develop a program on leadership. The planned Leadership Certificate Program is the brainchild of a committee member and is meant for employees who wish to move into leadership roles. As well, the committee is hoping to create a cost-benefit analysis of literacy and workplace essential skills which keeps “the human aspect in it.” For Josy, “our future is exciting and we don’t see anything slowing down.”

Dave retired on March 14th, 2008. He looks back with great satisfaction on the way workplace learning and literacy developed in Grande Prairie. “Its emergence is one of the best things I’ve taken away from CAMA.” Thanks for your contribution, Dave, and we wish you all the best.

“The most direct benefit is that people are not afraid to learn.”

–Josy Burrough

# Learner: Kristi Nelson

“I never thought about myself as being in the trades,” Kristi Nelson says with a laugh. “I had kids when I was young and gave up the idea of psychology and then criminology.” She thought she had “left behind the dream” of being involved in a career. Just recently, she earned her journeyman’s ticket as a Parts technician. Now, the possibilities are exciting.



Kristi began working part-time for the City of Grande Prairie’s Parks Department 10 years ago.

She loved working outdoors but when a full-time job in Parts delivery and pickup appeared, she applied and got the job. She began a three year apprenticeship program as a Parts technician through the City. Her past education gave her credits towards her ticket and each year she took a six week block of schooling. Kristi says the first year of study was “tough,” staying on campus away from her family. “Mechanics was hard, too, but I learned and I finished.”

The program helped her understand parts more clearly so “I’m not scared to look up parts and when I don’t know a part, I’m not afraid to ask. I’m not intimidated anymore.” With her ticket, she can help to order parts and do inventory control and data entry. If a new position opens up, she is qualified to apply. Kristi is also waiting for her national Red Seal ticket which will give her access to jobs across the country. “That’s the nice thing about the trades,” she says. Another satisfying part of her job is the chance “to learn everyday...there’s something different everyday.”

## Promoting learning for everyone

The trades also got Kristi involved in the City’s Workplace Learning Committee. In 2005, when she started her apprenticeship program she also joined the committee thanks to her role as vice-president of CUPE Local 787. “We have a ton of things to offer. That’s why I got involved and why I stay involved.” The enthusiasm of the committee members has led to “so many

“Grand Prairie offers great opportunities to explore whatever you’re interested in.”  
—Kristi Nelson

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different opportunities for learning,” says Kristi. Along with standard offerings such as GED and computer training, the committee supports personal development with courses in digital equipment, income tax forms, and environmental awareness. As well, it offers employees entertaining programs such as learning games on Municipal Government Day, Christmas card contests, and Lunch and Learn programs.

Kristi says the committee has to get the word out. “Education isn’t always a degree. It’s not just learning to write and spell. As a committee member, I’m allowed to speak and get people involved. We can offer you the opportunities to do what you’d like. Look at me and what I got to do.” Kristi wants to talk about her own learning journey and to encourage co-workers to get involved because “it’s never too late to learn.” Kristi says “you have to be dedicated, let the mind take over and then the heart goes in the direction it needs to go.” Learning touches our hearts: “You find out there’s more to learn about yourself and who you really are.”

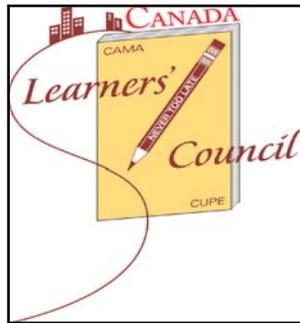
As a member of the CAMA Learners’ Council, Kristi enjoyed meeting other Council members from across the country and hearing their “different ideas and different

ways of thinking.” She is excited “to see where we’re going and what we’ll do.”

### Learning into the future

Kristi’s appetite for learning just keeps growing. Her next learning challenge will be getting her Occupational Health and Safety (OH&S) certificate. “I love seeing how organizations work” and as an OH&S officer, she would check to ensure that buildings are following health and safety laws and codes. In the next five years, “I definitely want to be working in my journeyman’s trade and also to begin the OH&S course. I want to continue learning as much as I can.”

Your future is looking bright, Kristi. And you’re the star guiding your way!



Thank you  
to the CAMA  
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literacy  
project.

Without you,  
this booklet  
would not  
have been  
possible.