



Debra Paris Perry returned to learning at age 58. She graduated from the veterinary administrative assistant program at Eastern College in Halifax in 2013.

If I Can Do It, You Can Do It

“Adult learning was so different from what I had experienced at school in the past. I had a part in the learning as opposed to just being told what to do. My teachers would listen to what I had to say and they respected my opinion.”~ Debra Paris Perry

I live in Uniacke Square in north end Halifax. My family is from Truro. I am a mother to three grown children and a grandmother to eighteen more. I come from a mixed cultural heritage of Black Nova Scotian and First Nations, and I am proud of both my cultures.

I was 14 years old when I left school. I refused to go to regular school because I was bored. The truant officer came to my house and told my mother that I had to go to a different school. So they put me there, but I kept running away. The teachers made me wear my pyjamas all day long because they thought that would make me stay in the building and not run away.

I remember an incident at school during a Canadian history class. The teacher was talking about Hudson Bay and told us about the native people fighting with European settlers. I got very upset and told him that if he was going to teach history, then he should teach it properly. I told him that the native people didn't start the fighting, the European settlers did. The teacher told me he would teach the way he wanted to and he kicked me out of class.

I finally ran away from school for good, and because of my experiences there, I didn't want anything to do with school at all.



Debra became a Learner Representative on the Literacy Nova Scotia Board of Directors in 2014.

Then I hitchhiked with friends and travelled around. We made it to Montreal, Toronto, and then across the US border to Buffalo and New York City. Truckers gave us rides. For the most part, they were nice to us, but we were very lucky that we didn't get hurt on those crazy adventures.

During this time, I did drugs and became addicted to alcohol and I regret those choices now. I struggled with addictions for many years, but I'm proud to say that I am now clean and sober.

After I raised my family, I had a lot of extra time on my hands. In order to stay clean and sober, I had to do something with my leisure time that was healthy and constructive. Going to school was a constructive way to use my time. I love animals and had always wanted to do a veterinary assistant program, but in order to do that I had to get back into the swing of school. So I enrolled in the adult learning program at Kjipuktuk Aboriginal College which is at the Mi'kmaq Native Friendship Centre. I was 58 years old. I felt comfortable going to Kjipuktuk because most of the other students were of mixed heritage like I am and they looked like me.

Adult learning was so different from what I had experienced at school in the past. I had a part in the learning as opposed to just being told what to do. My teachers would listen to what I had to say and they respected my opinion. My favourite teacher at Kjipuktuk is Chuck, who teaches science and math. I had to improve my understanding of these subjects if I wanted to be a veterinary assistant.

I had to improve my communications skills. All learners at Kjipuktuk have to take English, and I worked hard in those classes! As a result, my reading and writing skills are a lot better. I also learned how to organize my time. When I went back to school as an adult learner, I had to get up early in the morning, get my lunch ready and get to school, and get homework done at night.

I completed Level 3 in the adult learning program at Kjipuktuk and then I got into the veterinary administrative assistant program at Eastern College in Halifax. I graduated with my diploma in November 2013. Our graduation ceremony was at the World Trade and Convention Centre, and it was amazing! I am still giddy with goosebumps when I think about it.

My life is so different now. I am the Outreach Coordinator at the Uniacke Centre for Community Development. I also work part-time giving at-home first aid and grooming

to pets owned by seniors and people on fixed incomes. Reading has become a hobby for me and I enjoy books about animals, culture and history. I am able to help my grandchildren with their homework. My grandson was studying the periodic tables and I was able to help him because I had studied them in adult learning. It felt great to be able to encourage him and help him learn.

I always insisted that my family stay in school and receive the education and skills they needed to lead productive lives. I want all the young people in my neighborhood to do the same. The kids around here know me and they listen to me. I tell them to stay in school. I tell them to go back to school. I tell these kids that because they need to hear it.

I see the 'dope' boys standing on the street corners in my neighbourhood. They've dropped out of school and they make their living selling drugs. I say to them, "Listen, you boys are out there basically running your own businesses. You know about supplying the addicts and you've learned skills doing this. If you went back to school, you could make something good out of your lives. If you applied your skills in a positive and legal way, you'd be able to sleep at night and not worry about getting shot or the cops kicking your doors in, and you'd still be able to support yourselves. Instead of standing on that street corner twelve hours a day, you could go back to school and use your skills to do great things."

I recently gave a presentation to young women who live here in Uniacke Square. I showed them my diplomas from Kijipuktuk and Eastern College and I said "If I could accomplish this after forty years of fighting addictions and troubles in my life, you can do it too. You are young and you have young minds and there's no good reason why you can't do this."

Welfare is a trap for these young women. They get used to a cheque coming every month and they lose their ambition to do anything. When I hear these young women say "I can hardly wait to have a baby so I can get my own cheque," it makes me want to cry. I want to hear them say this:

"I can't wait to get my diploma so I can get a job."