

Tommy Gallant

My Return to School



Tommy and long-time friend and supporter Tracy Smith

There are many reasons why some people do not finish grade twelve and do not receive a high school diploma. Some choose to leave school and raise a family; some decide that they would rather work, while others simply feel that sitting in school is a waste of time and not for them. Quite often, however, the need for steady income and the personal satisfaction attained from enjoyable employment drives some of these individuals back to the classroom as adult learners. Being an adult learner is not easy, as you are surrounded by younger students, are not used to study techniques, and have adult obligations. This story is intended to provide a glimmer of hope to readers that are thinking of going back to school as an adult, or feel that they cannot change their employment situation because they feel they are too old to learn. I have done it, and so can you.

I am currently a mature postgraduate student pursuing my Masters of Science degree in Biology. My life, however, was not always academically inclined as I was one of the countless individuals that choose to leave school early every year to pursue work. The path I have elected to journey through education has not been straight and narrow, but has placed me in a life where I truly belong. I do not regret walking a winding path towards my goals, because I feel that I am a student because I want to be; justified by the rivers I have had to cross. I would not trade the irreplaceable knowledge I have attained in my years of work before academia, as I believe I am a better scientist knowing what its like to work hard to accomplish goals through determination.

I was born in Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island, the youngest of a family of eight. I completed grade nine at Birchwood Junior High School at the general level. I was placed in general education in junior high school because during these years I was not a very good student — lacking enthusiasm, constantly skipping classes, and never doing homework. At the time I was more interested in being outdoors fishing, hunting, and exploring nature. Following my grade nine general graduation, I was promoted the grade ten academic level at Charlottetown Rural high school. This promotion was made because a guidance counsellor noticed that I was able to do much more academically because, for a brief period when I applied myself in grade school, I was able to complete grades five and six in one year. Unfortunately, the shift to grade ten academic proved too much for me to handle, as I did not have background knowledge in many subjects. I decided that school was not for me halfway through grade ten and quit to enter the workforce; never finishing my grade ten education.

In the eight years that followed my premature exit from high school, I attempted to find out who I was and perhaps more importantly, who I wanted to be. It seems that I worked at everything during that time: a carpenter's helper for six years, a janitor, a sheet metal worker, and a general labourer, but none of these jobs were what I wanted to do. Finally, after being embarrassed too many times placing "high school dropout" on job applications, I decided that I was going to do something about it and enrolled for my General Education Development (G.E.D.) high school equivalency diploma. In 1989, thanks to the G.E.D. program, I was finally a high school graduate and this achievement had a profound effect on me. I began to think that maybe I was capable of much more, so I allowed myself the opportunity to consider the possibilities that were beginning to be revealed. With my confidence soaring, I secretly planned to enter University. I did my planning secretly because there are a lot of people who say, "You can't do it" and are unwilling to believe that a labourer and carpenter's helper can excel academically.

With my confidence-building G.E.D. success, I enrolled in adult night education classes at Holland College to attain background knowledge on the subjects I had missed. After two years of these classes I obtained my grade ten diploma in Math, Science, History, and English and promptly applied and was accepted to the University of Prince Edward Island.

Although I was approved for University, I was still faced with the problem of not knowing what I wanted to do, so I enrolled in a variety of classes to see which one interested me the most. One of these electives was introductory Biology. I soon realized I had a deep affection for the Biological Sciences because this covered everything I had grown up doing - being outside and enjoying nature. I never regretted my choice of Biology. I graduated in 1999 with a Bachelor of Science (Honours Biology) degree, through which I attained first-class (Dean's list) standing for my final two years of study. During my honours work on the toxic effects of PCB 118, I wrote five articles for publication; one of which is in the prestigious Toxicology journal. These achievements have paved the way for my recent award of being one three people at my institution to receive the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada (NSERC) student scholarship for postgraduate study.

I am now a mature postgraduate student pursuing my Masters of Science (M.Sc.) degree in Biology/ Agriculture working with the lowbush blueberry. My project is a joint effort between the University of Prince Edward Island, Nova Scotia Agricultural College, and Dalhousie University. This project has provided me with many opportunities such as travelling to Belarus, Lithuania, and Estonia to present the results of my study.

Graduating with my Masters of Science degree will provide me with the key I need for the next portion of my educational journey. I plan to continue my Biological training at the PhD level at a university in Canada, and once I obtain my Doctorate, I hope to combine my adoration for Biology with my passion for university life.

My ultimate career goal is to obtain a position as professor at a university where I could both teach and be actively involved in researching my chosen discipline. In my future years of teaching, I hope to spark a passion in students for life-long education because I feel no one is ever too old to stop learning.

-Thomas L. Gallant