

Life-long learning commitment takes B.C. scholars to England

Two mature students, Kathleen Conabree and Glen Leonard (see page 3), are both off to the universities of their choice in England for graduate studies, with the help of Queen Elizabeth II British Columbia Centennial Scholarships, the province's highest scholastic award at the post-secondary level.

Scholarship to help anthropologist get to bare bones



Kathleen Conabree, second from right, with Minister Bond and friends Seath Gable and Carolyn Tremblay. Kathleen is attending Bournemouth University in England with the help of her Queen Elizabeth II scholarship.

Kathleen Conabree plans to use the B.C. government's highest post-secondary scholastic award to prepare herself for a career investigating mass gravesites resulting from genocide and war crimes.

Conabree, 44, graduated this spring from the University of Victoria with a bachelor's in anthropology, and was awarded a \$4,000 Queen Elizabeth II British Columbia Centennial Scholarship to pursue a master's degree at Bournemouth University in England, where she'll study forensic archeology and international investigation.

"Helping to uncover information that can give those wronged by war crimes or human rights abuses some peace or restitution is a deep motivating factor for me," says Conabree, whose extensive travels as a child opened her eyes early to the reality of poverty and death.

So did the four years she spent in the Dominican Republic, where she saw "a lot of social injustice - 10-year-old prostitutes; children selling anything they could to buy alcohol and drugs for their parents."

Conabree moved to the Dominican Republic in 1987, soon after the birth of her first child, Kevin, now 17, because she was ready for a change. She supported herself and her son by creating a company that redecorated hotels for expatriate owners, and provided employment to Dominicans at the same time.

From art instructor to lab assistant

She's also worked in the shipping industry in Quebec as an executive secretary, for B.C. Ferries, as an emergency duty officer (and in the catering department between emergencies), as a farmer, as

an art instructor - and as a lab assistant at UVic's anthropology department, where she butchered road kill and other animals whose skeletons were destined to be catalogued as a resource to help archeologists in the field identify the bones they find.

Conabree's lab job - which also involved caring for the voracious beetle colony that strips all traces of flesh from the bones - was only one of the ways she funded her studies at UVic. She was also a teaching assistant - a job usually reserved for graduate students - for seven different courses in all.

Through it all, she took on a variety of volunteer work, including signing up for the UVic Speakers Bureau and visiting schools and groups to talk about various anthropological topics. And she was parenting her daughter, Sahara, now nine, and helping her come up to speed for her transition to the English school system this fall, when the two of them pack up their few remaining possessions and head off to Bournemouth, on the south coast of England.

"I've sold everything I owned, including my car," says Conabree. "My daughter and I each have a suitcase and a bike - and we have one cat."

Queen Elizabeth II scholarship winners are chosen on the basis of academic distinction and the likelihood of the individuals making a substantial contribution in their field of study.

Commitment to human rights

"Kathleen Conabree has already demonstrated her commitment to human rights, and this scholarship will move her a step closer to achieving her goal of helping victims of war crimes," said Advanced Education Minister Shirley Bond. "She has done excellent work in her undergraduate years on a variety of important projects, and I offer our government's congratulations on her achievements."

While at UVic, Conabree was a project leader assigned to study human remains from the Union Bay area to determine age, sex, possible stature and number of individuals the burials involved. The remains, now at UVic, are to be repatriated to the First Nation to which they belong.

She also piloted an interdisciplinary special studies course in forensic facial reconstruction, which melded elements of anthropology and art education. She learned casting techniques for the human skull from the exhibition arts technology department at the Royal B.C. Museum. Then, after doing the cultural research and the forensic reconstruction research, she recreated the face for a female skull found in China.

"She had a combination of different facial and other cranio-structural features - she could have been a missionary's child, or a mixture of Chinese and East Indian or Russian," says Conabree.

"I'm so grateful that professors in both departments supported the project, as well as those professionals at the museum, without whose help it would never have gotten off the ground."

Science becomes art—and vice versa

Conabree sees her working falling in the “grey area between science and art, where each becomes the other - science becomes art, and art becomes science. While the research is fact-based science, there is a strong intuitive component as well.”

“When I started in anthropology as a social science, I was more interested in the social than the science,” she says. “But as I got further into my degree, I became more interested in the science - the bones and the stories they tell.”

In cultural field research, Conabree explains, people have different motivations for saying things and doing things. Even such simple variables as what interviewers wear, or what they look like, can influence the answers they’re given.

“I’m the kind of person who needs the facts, and to get to the bottom of things,” Conabree says. “I want to be able to bring the truth down to its bare bones: the bones don’t lie.”



Former dropout wins top B.C. scholarship

Glen Leonard shows Advanced Education Minister Shirley Bond his Queen Elizabeth II scholarship medal. The \$20,000 is helping him pursue his graduate studies at Oxford University.

Glen Leonard, 35, is studying social critic E.M. Forster, whose books helped Glen survive years of bullying at school.

A student whose desperation to escape years of bullying led him to drop out of school at 16 has won the B.C. government’s highest scholastic award at the post-secondary level this year.

Glen Leonard, now 35, has been awarded the \$20,000 Queen Elizabeth II British Columbia Centennial Scholarship, given to the province’s top university graduate who is going on to further studies in a Commonwealth country and is likely to make a major contribution in their field.

He has been accepted directly into the PhD program at Cambridge University in England, as well as the master’s degree program at Oxford University, after finishing his degree at University of B.C. with marks that led the chair of the honours English department to call him “one of the brightest and most gifted honours students” he had seen in 34 years of teaching.

But 19 years ago, Leonard left his Lower Mainland high school after he could no longer stand the bullies who taunted him in the locker room, pushed and shoved him in the hallways and in gym class, and laid in wait to beat him up after he left the school grounds.

“Like other students who are bullied in school - whether it’s because of their sexual orientation, race or religion - I often felt hopeless, and in many ways, it’s a miracle I’m still here,” Leonard says of those “dark days,” when his main solace was reading. “Literature was an escape for me, and also a liberation.”

Despite having completed only Grade 9, Leonard found a job at Marks & Spencer, where he designed window displays and eventually co-ordinated visual presentation for all the company’s department stores throughout B.C. He was well paid, doing creative work, travelling on an expense account - but something was missing.

Back to school at 23

So at 23, he earned the equivalent of a high school diploma through the Ministry of Education after six months of study. With that under his belt, he enrolled at Capilano College, and took course after course, while still working full-time.

Right from the start, Leonard went from being a B student in high school to earning consistent As and A-pluses, achieving 100 per cent in a particularly tough English literature course.

“It was a treat for me to go to school - my whole life became focused on my education. And I felt I had overcome my past failure: the fact that I had to leave high school always stayed with me.”

When Marks & Spencer decided to pull out of Canada in the late 1990s, Leonard came to a crossroads. He’d gone as far as he could go at Capilano, having finished all the available credits to transfer to third-year university. He could either find another display job - or he could give up his career, and go back to school full-time to finish his degree.

He chose the degree - and continued the successes he’d enjoyed at Capilano College.

“When I was getting those As and A-pluses at UBC, it was a sort of vindication of my earlier disappointments at high school, and made me feel that the darkest period of my life was well and truly behind me,” remembers Leonard, who won scholarships and was invited to join the Golden Key National Honour Society of North America.

Teaching new Canadians

As a break from studying, Leonard volunteered as an English tutor and gave lessons to new Canadians, including a mother from China and her six-year-old son. “It was amazing to go from teaching an adult to teaching a child,” says Leonard, who realized during that experience that he had a talent for teaching. He decided he wanted to do so at the university level, combining his love of literature with his love of teaching.

His honours thesis dealt with the work of social critic E.M. Forster, who has a special place in Leonard’s heart. The British novelist’s sophisticated liberal humanist philosophy had been both a beacon of hope and an avenue of escape for Leonard when he was struggling with the unthinking brutality of his tormentors at school.

“Forster felt himself to be something of an outsider in society, and it was this that led him to formulate a philosophy based on tolerance, sympathy and understanding,” Leonard says.

His connection with Forster led Leonard to decide on a plan of action - to study at Oxford, which has a world-renowned master’s program in British literary modernism; and then Cambridge for his PhD, because that’s where all of Forster’s papers are stored.

After graduating from UBC in spring 2003, Leonard earned a certificate in teaching English. He spent the next few months teaching and applying for scholarships and to graduate schools. “The application process is almost a full-time job in itself,” he says.

Overcoming the age barrier

In the case of winning scholarships, it’s not an easy job for a mature student. “Age is a definite barrier,” Leonard says bluntly. He acknowledges one possible reason - that younger students have longer careers ahead of them - but also notes that lack of focus and burnout results in a high level of dropouts at the master’s and PhD level. “I have a clear focus; I’m going to accomplish (my goal) come hell or high water. And I honestly feel I could not be the student I am now if it hadn’t been for my years working.”

The Queen Elizabeth II scholarship has no such barrier - in fact, two of this year’s winners are mature students.

“Our government funds life-long learning because we see the benefits to individual students and society as a whole,” said Advanced Education Minister Shirley Bond. “We believe in acknowledging and encouraging excellence, and Glen Leonard’s achievements deserve recognition and reward.”

Leonard’s \$20,000 will cover half of his expenses for a year at Oxford, where tuition alone is almost \$23,000 Cdn; his savings, student loans and sacrifices by his parents - now retired - will make up the rest.

Leonard doesn’t know where he’ll end up after he finishes his master’s and doctorate - although if work is available, he’ll definitely come back to B.C. to teach British modernism.

“At Capilano College and at UBC, the level of academic standard was exceptionally high, preparing me thoroughly for Oxford and Cambridge,” he says. “And from my firsthand experience, both at college and university in B.C., I know outstanding teachers can and do make a difference in the lives of their students.”



Back at school - helpful hints for parents

As a parent, you want the best education for your child - and there are many ways that you can help your child succeed.

Now that school is back in session, here are a few strategies to support your child’s progress through the year:

Help keep your child healthy by encouraging your child to make healthy eating choices and stay active. By letting them help you pack their lunch, they can learn to choose healthier foods.

Let your child see you read, and set aside time each day for family reading. Talk to your child about books, and read to him or her.

Listen to your child and focus on him or her at the end of the day. Ask questions and listen to how the day went and what the highlights were.

Meet your child's teacher and school principal. You can get valuable insight into your child's progress by talking to school staff.

Stick to the homework routine that was established at the start of school. For more information on homework help, please visit Homework Help for Parents.

If your child is in the early years of secondary study, there are also strategies available for studying, homework and staying organized. Students entering Grade 10 should have received the new graduation planner that outlines the new graduation requirements. This is also the time to start thinking about awards and scholarships.



Fund helps knock down career barriers

Former minister of human resources Stan Hagen (left) and Burnaby North MLA Richard Lee speak with Darren Childs, one of the Neil Squire Foundation's Disability Supports Centre's first clients. Darren explained how the Foundation supported his transition from unemployment into successful entrepreneurship.

Seated in his motorized wheelchair, Darren Childs recounts the story of his journey from unemployment to a successful career as an entrepreneur, consultant and teacher.

Tears of gratitude well in his eyes as he talks. Because not long ago, Darren was physically unable to work. Today, he is achieving his employment goals.

More people with disabilities, like Darren, are pushing their workplace barriers out of the way, thanks to the government's \$20-million Disability Supports for Employment Fund.

The fund was set up in April 2003 to help not-for-profit agencies provide workplace supports for people with all kinds of disabilities. So far, 19 agencies throughout B.C. have received grants to support paraplegics, the blind, the hearing impaired, and people with brain injuries and mental disabilities.

Darren's workplace solution came from the Neil Squire Foundation in Burnaby, one of the many groups to receive support from the fund last year. Darren said the voice-activated software and

other adaptive technologies he received from the foundation trimmed his preparation time for a weekly online class from 25 hours to just two! Brian Stride of the Neil Squire Foundation says it's amazing what something as simple as an adaptive keyboard or a mouth-controlled joystick can do for someone's life. It means freedom... freedom to achieve.

How can I benefit from the fund?

The Disability Supports for Employment Fund provides help for people with disabilities through grants to not-for-profit agencies. Individuals are encouraged to bring their ideas or suggestions for grant proposals to appropriate agencies within their community.

The fund is administered by the Vancouver Foundation, which meets regularly with the Minister's Council on Employment for Persons with Disabilities to select successful grant applicants.

Not-for-profit organizations are welcome to apply to the Disability Supports for Employment Fund. Terms and conditions for grant applicants are available at:

<http://www.vancouverfoundation.bc.ca/GrantInformation/dsef/AboutDSEF.shtml>

For information on organizations currently providing disability supports, follow:

<http://www.vancouverfoundation.bc.ca/GrantInformation/GrantSearch.asp>



Investing in our best resource: Our kids

The Ministry of Children and Family Development is helping B.C.'s children be the best they can be with recent grants for child care (\$4.9 million), adoption (\$3 million), and Down Syndrome research (\$200,000).

The ministry wants to give our kids the good start in life they need - and deserve. For many kids, dependable, high-quality child care is an important part of this healthy beginning. Government funds 68,000 spaces through the child-care operating funding program. Over \$100 million per year is designated for child-care subsidies for low-income families.

A recent grant recognizes the importance of early diagnosis and a better understanding of special needs. An innovative medical device in a Burnaby lab is the first in Western Canada: B.C.'s magnetoencephalography system, known as MEG, will have an impact on Down Syndrome research around the world.

The \$3-million adoption and permanency trust fund will help increase the number of children adopted into permanent, loving homes - a number that has already more than doubled from 163 in 2000-01 to 338 in 2003-04. Adoption brings hope for a better future, and it can bring out the best in a kid. Madeline, an adopted eight-year old, writes: "A family isn't complete without love."

A province isn't complete without loved children.