

It's never too late for a second chance at an education

Years after she left high school to care for family, Olga Rusnak is finally living her dream



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Olga Rusnak at the Makoonsag Intergenerational Children's Centre where she now works.

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Olga Rusnak stopped going to school after Grade 9. She came from a large family and stayed at home to look after her brothers and sisters.

"I loved my parents and I was needed at home," Rusnak said this week.

Now 55, Rusnak explained how she and her older sister put family ahead of school. She put off her education until late in her 40s, working in retail and living paycheque to paycheque.

About seven years ago, at a time when her late husband, Daryl "John" Rusnak, was diagnosed with cancer, Rusnak made up her mind to go back to school. And despite his failing health, Rusnak said her biggest inspiration was her late husband.

All through cancer treatments, then the spread of cancer and his ultimate demise, Rusnak said her husband never once gave up on her dreams for an education. He rallied her through the tough times and kept her focused on a future he wouldn't be able to share.

"He gave me the support to do what I wanted to do. Once my mind is determined, I can do things. What all his love and support did was give me courage to move forward," Rusnak said.

Enter Urban Circle Training Centre Inc., an indigenous-led United Way agency that provides culturally appropriate education and training to indigenous men and women. Rusnak enrolled in the centre's high school equivalency program first, graduating in 2009.

She went on to earn her education assistant certificate, also from Urban Circle, in 2012. Her husband attended both graduations. Elders from Urban Circle visited John in the hospital, while Rusnak divided her time between her husband's bedside and her studies.

"I'll never forget that, how supportive they were. They would come to the hospital and visit," Rusnak said.

Winnipeg is home to the largest urban indigenous population in Canada; Statistics Canada figures showed that in 2001 more than eight per cent of the population were indigenous.

With one of the fastest growing populations in the province and in Canada, there has been a growing recognition of indigenous-led services in the city.

"All recruitment is done throughout the city of Winnipeg and also in the province of Manitoba, but most of our students are living here in the city. All of our students are of indigenous descent," said Haven Stumpf, director of operations for Urban Circle.

Ninety per cent of graduates, much like Rusnak, identify cultural teaching as a key to their employment success. Over the last 25 years, graduation rates have averaged 90 per cent, with more than 90 per cent finding employment.

"We train about 150 students per year. Urban Circle has been in operation since 1991 and has grown from 12 women only on social assistance to what it is today with partnerships with Red River College, Health Sciences Centre and Seven Oaks and many public and private-sector businesses for our programs," Stumpf said.

Programs include a Mature Grade 12 Diploma Program with an Apprenticeship Stream certified by Red River College, Health Care Aide/Health Unit Clerk, and an Educational Assistance and Family Support Worker/FASD Program.

"All of these programs have been developed with a direct need from the community," Stumpf said.

These days, Rusnak works at Makoonsag Intergenerational Children's Centre, the Urban Circle's on-site childcare facility for students attending its job training and money management programs.

She is also pursuing her education. Two days a week, she attends early childhood education classes to earn a certificate from Red River College. When she graduates next January, it will be the first time her husband won't be in the audience.

"It still hurts," Rusnak said of her husband's passing. "My husband wanted me to keep on going and that's what I'm doing. In his honour."
"I love what I do. I love working with children."

United Way Winnipeg supports 21 agency partners.
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