

The Daily Gleaner, Fredericton, NB

As published on page B1 on January 11, 2006

The final frontier

Frontier College is a national non-profit organization designed to help people with their literacy skills

By JENNIFER DUNVILLE

dunville.jennifer@dailygleaner.com

Alexandra Tait knew for certain she was in the right field of study when a sixth grade boy told her that she was cool.

She was at his school helping him with his homework when she realized she was learning just as much from an elementary schoolkid as he was learning from her university experience.

Tait says she had just finished tutoring the student when he announced what he thought of her.

"I was so elated to be validated by this sixth grader. It was so funny. That's when I knew for certain I wanted to be a teacher at the elementary school level. The kids are so bluntly honest. And of course I had to act all aloof so not to lose my new 'cool' status."

Similar experiences are happening in schools and community centres throughout Fredericton. And it's been going on since 1994 - homework clubs designed to bring volunteers together with individuals who need help with their homework or literacy skills.

"I saw an ad that Frontier College had put up on the St. Thomas campus and decided to check it out," says Tait. "I've been volunteering with them ever since. That was two years ago."

Frontier College is a national non-profit organization designed to help people with their literacy skills. Volunteers in Fredericton, like Tait, are recruited mainly from St. Thomas

(THE DAILY GLEANER / DAVID SMITH PHOTO)

Alexandra Tait says the experiences she had tutoring for Frontier College gave her a great foundation for teaching. But she emphasizes that the best part of it all is the joy in helping people



and UNB. They are then interviewed, trained, and paired up with an individual who needs one-on-one tutoring.

"People are in (homework clubs) not because they aren't intelligent, but because they need to be challenged and encouraged," Tait says. "Some kids just learn better outside of a group setting."

Deborah Campbell is the director of the English section for Frontier College Fredericton. She says they recruit an average of 60 volunteers every year.

"There's a huge need for this kind of thing," Campbell says. "There are many children who fall behind in class or who don't learn to read for whatever reason. Usually it just takes some individual attention to help them make some gain and catch up with their classmates.

"University students make great volunteers for our Homework Clubs because they are wonderful role models. They demonstrate just by what they are doing that they value reading and writing and that's very powerful for kids."

Campbell says it's more than just education students helping out. Volunteers for the Homework Club have come from engineering, business, nursing and even geology programs. Each volunteer works a minimum of two hours per week at a school or community centre.

"Mainly our volunteers are students who want to make a difference and spend their volunteer time in something that helps the community," says Campbell.

Frontier College's Homework Club had its beginnings in St. Johns, Newfoundland. It began with the name Homework Haven, but it's the same idea as the club.

"Newfoundland had such success with Homework Haven that Frontier decided to expand that program all across Canada," says Campbell.

The success of Fredericton's Homework Clubs is witnessed first-hand by teachers.

Patricia Orser is a teacher at Leo Hayes High School. She says she has seen the grades and attitudes of her students improve as a result of having worked with a tutor.

"One student in particular was at a very low reading level and had absolutely no confidence. With the one-on-one tutoring after school, he developed a confidence and a

love for books that he didn't have, even at the high school level," says Orser.

"It is an unusual and wonderful change because normally if a student isn't reading fluently by high school they are not apt to ever read fluently because they are so discouraged with themselves. The tutor established a bond with the student and there was a great deal of respect between them. It gave him the drive and confidence he needed."

Tutors are screened and a police check is done before they are interviewed for the program. They are also given a full day of training and a tutor manual. What a tutor does with the student depends on the subject the student needs help with.

"Sometimes students and tutors just read together. When I was helping a student with English, we found a book that suited his interests, read it, and discussed it freely," says Tait. "With math, I helped a student by using flashcards and games to help him remember."

Campbell says the most amazing thing about the program is not just the change in the students' grades and attitudes, but the way they come together and learn from each other.

"The tutor learns how to motivate people, connect with children and encourage others. They often come to realize that children are not that different from themselves.

"It also gives university students, who might be working toward their teaching degrees, an inside look at what it is like to teach."

Tait started tutoring when she was studying for her bachelor of arts degree at St. Thomas.

She is now enrolled in the bachelor of education program at UNB. Tait says as soon as she gets into a routine at school she will be back to volunteering again.

"The kids are so amazing. It's great to talk to them and hear their opinions on life, The experiences I had tutoring gave me the basis of everything I'm going to teach now. I know what works for me and what doesn't when it comes to teaching," says Tait.

"Mostly though, it was just a joy for me to do it. Tutoring is something I look forward to and recommend to anyone.

"Even if you don't want to be a teacher, it's really fulfilling to give back to the community and Frontier College helps you do that."