

Committed to helping Aboriginal students succeed

Story by Rob Rombouts

Photo by Blackbird Photography



When **Vanessa Henry** dropped out of school at age 17, she was only six credits away from graduating. She was also pregnant, and the stress of her pregnancy and the attention from others was too much for her. She left school and did not return for more than a decade.

Vanessa always wanted to go back to school. She had long dreamed of being an elementary school teacher. But the loss of her partner, the father of her children, put the plans on hold as she put the care of her children first. When her children were all of school age, she went back.

She finished her high school education and attended [Mohawk College's](#) Education Assistant program. While there she ran into another obstacle due to her Aboriginal background. Vanessa felt that many students and teachers looked to her as an authority for Aboriginal topics and she often felt put on the spot and uncomfortable. To find support, she visited the [Aboriginal Education Student Services](#) (AESS). The counsellors helped her in her situation.

The AESS office was a comfort zone for Vanessa, and through her time there, she found employment as an Office Assistant, and attended conferences where she met successful Aboriginal people from across Canada. Meeting these people "inspired me to continue to believe in myself."

Vanessa is a Six Nations member from the Onondaga Nation, Turtle Clan. Her father is a residential school survivor who has inspired her to learn her cultural background and being proud of who she is as an Aboriginal person.

She plans to continue her path toward being an elementary school teacher, and wants to be an inspiration to others. Working in the AESS office, she has come across other students who have been discouraged. She shares her story to keep them motivated.

She encourages her family members to go back to school. "I never imagined I'd be where I am right now," she said. "I tell them that if, as a single mother, I can do, you can do it. You have to do something you love to do, and it will follow through."

Education Works Alliance is a community group dedicated to building prosperity through training, education and lifelong learning. The group's mandate is to raise the education, literacy and skill levels of Grand Erie residents, in order to broaden opportunities for employments and economic development. For more information visit www.educationworks.ca