

Jessica's dream includes paying taxes

She begins work next week under highly successful NorQuest program

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One of Jessica McLean's dreams is close to coming true. She's going to be paying taxes.

McLean, 20, will join the workforce next week in a program that teaches job and everyday survival skills to young adults with unique learning needs. Her aim, she said, is retail.

"I want to work for Zellers," she said, determination showing through during an interview at NorQuest College.

Be independent, work, pay taxes? She grinned broadly. "Yes," she said.

McLean is one of about 75 students who take the job skills program each year. The students can't be classified, said supervisor Andrea Massing, except that all demonstrate learning difficulties which stand between them and a job.

Today, the transitional vocational program is celebrating its 20th anniversary. It has been highly successful, providing basic skills over the years to more than 1,000 students, placing more than 70 percent of them into jobs.

In the past, many of those students would have been shunted to the margins, perhaps never finding a job. Instead they do productive work in the city's ware houses, kitchens, nursing homes, restaurants, offices and malls — jobs limited only by their own skill levels or sometimes the imagination of employers.

But after 20 years, a lot of employers



Jessica McLean, 20, is backed up by her classmates in the helpful and effective transitional vocational program offered by NorQuest College.

are inside. "We have developed such solid support in the business community," said placement counsellor Tammy Hawkins, "that they call us when they are looking for employees." McLean, a graduate of Austin O'Brien high school, will pursue her dream of an independent life with a job placement at Zellers and several other employers during a seven month community training program beginning next week.

Zellers, said Hawkins, has been one of the supportive employers that makes the program work.

"I like to meet people," said McLean, explaining why she was looking forward to a job in retail. "I am learning to give compliments and to receive them."

She is learning basic interaction skills. The program is highly practical and has one overwhelming goal — to determine what the students need so they can be employable, and to provide them with what they need.

"We always knew where we were going," said Massing, who helped establish the program 20 years ago and will retire next month.

"We were trying to help people get jobs. It's a pretty clear goal. We have helped people recognize their own worth, and then we have helped place them with employers who have been absolutely phenomenal."

One reason for the employers' support, she said, is the students' attitudes. "Our students have the attitude that they want to work, and they want to stay someplace for a long time."

NorQuest president Wayne Shillington said the program is one of the college's most uplifting. "What it gives students is the opportunity to achieve their potential.

"They want a meaningful life, the opportunity to earn an independent living.

"The program also fits the college's aim of determining what its students need to find work, and meeting the need. The transition program "is not a special education program in the sense of labelling or pigeonholing students. They are part of a continuum of people looking for a living."

And, in the case of students like McLean, finding one.

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