



News Release

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Economic Downturn Brings Adult Students to Century College

Kathy Bell's indoor painting business has had its ups and downs over the years, but this year when the up didn't follow the down, Bell, 44, a resident of St. Paul's East Side, decided to go to college.

She picked Century College because it was recommended by one of her clients, a Harvard-educated University of Minnesota professor who realized Bell's academic potential after the two painted side by side and talked as they worked.

"My professor client is deep into the sciences and we talked a lot about global warming, the history of pandemics, the nature of bacteria and other topics that I find fascinating," said Bell. "She encouraged me to pursue higher education because she felt I had an inquisitive mind. I am really looking forward to taking an introduction to microbiology next semester and maybe, eventually, getting into biological research."

Century College for the last two years has been increasingly reaching out to adult students, offering more online, fast-track, evening and Saturday courses. Enrollment among credit students 25 and older increased

by nearly 13 percent from fall 2006 to fall 2008. Enrollment among non-credit students is also increasing as adults seek to enhance their marketable skills.

An avid reader, Century student Kathy Bell grew up in Plymouth and spent her summers as a kid reading science books. But life skidded off track in her teen years and she ended up leaving home and moving around a lot, sometimes living on her own and sometimes living in foster care or group homes. Drugs and alcohol problems run in her family, she said. She has been sober for 11 years.

Bell started her business, Pure Color Painting, about eight years ago. Her clients include single moms, elderly retirees and low-income people who pay her on a sliding scale according to their ability to pay. “I want to create an environment of harmony based on the Tibetan philosophy of staying above conflict,” said Bell.

The economic downturn was hard on her business but it opened a door of opportunity for Bell, who joined a growing number of adults who are returning to college to gain new skills and knowledge. “Century is filled with people who are getting a second chance,” said Bell. She said one of her classmates, for example, works overnights at a transportation company, attends Century during the day and earns top grades.

“The sheer determination of the adult students is inspiring,” said Bell. “It is useful for us to be a model for the younger students in class, who are smart and funny and inclusive. I talk to people here all day long, and almost everyone is receptive. I used to be extremely self-conscious when I was younger, but when you act as if you are confident, you become confident. Going into business for myself taught me how to sell myself. You have to be sincere. You have to make that human connection. It’s the way I do things and it beats the heck out of being an island.”

Bell said attending Century is not just about getting a degree. “It’s about being invited to the human table in a positive way,” said Bell. “I feel like a student now, especially when I have those “a-ha” moments and I begin to understand something new. That is somewhat surreal.”



Photo: Century College student Kathy Bell