



News Release

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Former Fraser Papers worker named NMCC Student of the Year

Aroostook County - "It has been a remarkable journey," says 57-year-old Robert Gagnon of Madawaska, referring to the past three years of his life. The soft-spoken and unassuming grandfather and former mill worker, who accepted an early buyout from Fraser Papers when the St. John Valley facility downsized in the summer of 2007, will graduate from Northern Maine Community College on May 15, fulfilling a lifelong dream.

Gagnon will not only earn his associate of applied science degree in plumbing and heating, but he will do so with a perfect 4.0 grade point average and with the honor of being named NMCC's 2010 Student of the Year. It's a distinction that will afford him the opportunity to share the commencement podium with featured speaker Governor John Baldacci, and moreover the chance to share his remarkable story and words of advice with his fellow graduates.

"This is an honor I never expected and one that I feel could have just as easily belonged to another student. There are so many other great students here that are just as deserving of this award," said Gagnon. "They have had to overcome challenges and have reached their goal as well."

For Gagnon, attending college and earning a degree is a dream he not so long ago thought permanently derailed and unattainable. A 1970 graduate of Madawaska High School, he attended the University of Maine at Fort Kent for a semester, but left in early 1971 for a well-paying job at the Fraser mill.

For the next 36 years, Gagnon's salary from Fraser supported him and his wife Diane and their two children, Nicholas and Stephanie. But, in 2007 changes at the mill prompted him to make a change of his own.

"When Fraser shut the number 1 and number 2 machines down, they offered early retirement for employees 60 years or older. Since I was 55, I was not eligible, but I could opt for a buyout. That is when I made the decision to pursue my dream of attending college," said Gagnon. "Most of the decisions I have made in the past I have questioned. This was the first time that deep down in my heart I knew it was the right choice. It just felt right."

Confident in his decision, Gagnon attended an NMCC Info Night held in the St. John Valley that summer. Soon thereafter he began the process of becoming a student and transitioning his life accordingly. He worked with officials at the Maine Career Center and at NMCC's off-campus center in Madawaska to apply for Trade Adjustment Assistance funds, take a college placement exam and complete the paperwork to enroll.

All appeared on track for Gagnon to begin classes in the fall of 2007, but circumstances again intervened. A week before he was to sign his voluntary layoff papers from Fraser, a buyer the family thought certain for their home backed out of the agreement. Then came the news that, due to the illness of another employee at the mill, Fraser could not release him from employment until later in the year.

“We thought we had a buyer for our house and that I would be finishing up at Fraser before the fall semester so I decided to live my dream of going to NMCC, which was NMVTI when I graduated from high school,” said Gagnon. “I was deeply disappointed, but after talking to my family and receiving the support I needed, I went through with enrolling at NMCC.”

Having waited more than three decades to follow his dream, a delay of a few months was a minor annoyance. Fraser did release him from employment before Christmas, and although his home did not sell, he decided he would enroll for some classes at NMCC's St. John Valley Center in Madawaska and commute to the Presque Isle campus for other courses, including those for his major, plumbing and heating.

Gagnon began classes that December through NMCC's winter mini-term, which is offered between the more traditional fall and spring semesters. Although apprehensive at first, he quickly settled in to the life of a college student.

“It was like starting all over again. I'd ask myself ‘how will an old man fit in with these young students?’ I felt out of place at first, but not too long after it felt normal. I thought that I would have had a hard time learning since I had been out of school since 1970. It was better than what I expected,” said Gagnon.

Fully embracing the college experience, he accepted a work-study position within his major – plumbing and heating. Shortly after taking on the job to assist instructor Al St. Peter, he learned that the minimal income he would receive would negatively affect his unemployment compensation. Instead of quitting, he continued to volunteer his time in support of St. Peter. Two years later, he continues to serve his classmates as a senior intern, a tutor and an inspiration.

“He encourages the other students to do as he does and that is to strive to do the best work possible,” said St. Peter, who was among the faculty members who nominated Gagnon for the student of the year honor. “He has been a stellar student in his desire to always seek a top grade but, furthermore, he has been a tremendous example through his top notch work ethic and his human compassion toward others.”

Gagnon made an impression with faculty and students outside of his major program of study as well. Jennifer Graham, NMCC instructor of English, had him in three of her classes.

“To me, Robert exemplifies what it means to be an NMCC student. He undertook the challenge of getting an education in order to better himself and his family’s life; he returned to school after having been in the work force for a long time; he made school a priority and has truly sacrificed to get his degree. His attitude is exceptional,” said Graham. “He has openly accepted new ideas, and if you speak with him for any length of time, his attitude of gratitude for what he has learned and his experience at NMCC is obvious. Returning to school has been a life-changing experience for him. I feel very lucky to have had him as a student.”

Gagnon credits St. Peter, Graham and the other members of the faculty and staff at Northern Maine Community College with his success. As he prepares for the next chapter in his life, he is looking forward to the new challenges and opportunities that lie ahead.

In addition to inspiring fellow students and others at NMCC, Gagnon has also served as an inspiration in his own household. Following in her husband’s lead, Diane Gagnon has enrolled in classes as well. She now attends Empire Beauty School in Caribou.

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Northern Maine Community College Student of the Year Robert Gagnon of Madawaska stands in front of the Fraser Paper mill in Madawaska where he worked for 36 years. The former beater engineer, who accepted a buyout offer from the mill when it downsized in 2007, will earn his associate’s degree in plumbing and heating on May 15.