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## Documentary chronicles hardships of juggling classes, kids, jobs

Young mothers juggle kids, jobs, classes to achieve the goal of earning a college diploma.



Nickeisha Henry with kids, from left, Isiah Kinch, 8, Ethan Kinch, 4 and Hannah Kinch, 7. (RI [ORDER THIS PHOTO](#))

By **LOUISE BROWN**

Mon., Nov. 30, 2015

She was a teen mom — twice. By her 20s she was a mother of three.

Then one day, Nickeisha Henry decided to rewrite her future — and education would be the key.

But the juggling and tenacity it took this single parent to earn a three-year college diploma as a child and youth worker could make a movie.

Actually — it has: A new film directed by veteran documentary maker Laura Sky, about the challenges facing single parents who are students at Sheridan College's Brampton campus, features the dizzying schedule Henry tried to keep up in second year.

"I would be at my placement for 8:30 (a.m.), finish at 2:30 and quickly pick up my kids from school and drop them off at home and go to work at McDonalds for 4 o'clock. I'd finish there at 10 o'clock, get home by 10:30 to sleep for half an hour — if lucky — then get up again at 11 to be out of the house by 11:30 to be a cleaner at a movie theatre starting at midnight," said Henry. "Sometimes I could finish at 4 a.m., sometimes at like 6:30."

After four months she dropped the midnight gig out of sheer burnout. Without her mother and sister to help care for Isaiah, Hannah and Ethan, Henry probably couldn't have managed college at all.

Today, Henry has graduated from Sheridan and is employed by the YMCA. She is the first in her family with a post-secondary credential.

"People told me I'd never graduate from high school, so to have a college diploma, I'm proving them wrong."

Henry is one of several Sheridan students featured in Sky's 27-minute film, *She Never Gives Up*, about the obstacles to higher learning often faced by low-income single mothers. The women call for more flexible start times — 8 a.m. classes are tough with kids to drop and a long bus ride to campus — as well as affordable campus child care and bursaries geared for students with children.

"The documentary is a call to action for the college to think about how it can support students who may be also raising a family and working three jobs," said Sky.

The movie is part of an unusual initiative by Sheridan to tackle some of the barriers facing marginalized students at its Brampton campus. Associate Dean Maher Ghalayini, of the School of Applied Health and Community Services, said the college is "thinking about how we as an institution support students going through these challenges, whether they're students with mental health needs, or single parents, or they're LGBTQ."

He suggested early morning classes might be offered at least partly online, an idea that has grown over the past 20 years across Ontario's community colleges, noted Linda Franklin, president of Colleges Ontario. That is "creating more opportunities for students with children who may not be able to attend classes in person."

"Students with dependants face a variety of challenges in accessing a college education," said Alliance president Jeff Scherer. "We believe financial support for these students can be strengthened by eliminating age-based eligibility criteria for the Ontario Tuition Grant."

Sheridan graduate Melissa Robinson, who has two kids, said “It was hard. When my student loan money was gone at the end of the month, the fridge was empty and I’d have to tell my kids, ‘We can’t eat much today.’

“But I needed to get an education. Take Your Kid to Work Day? I wanted to be able to do that.”

### **By the numbers**

**60:** Percentage of Ontario community college students 21 or older.

**23:** Percentage of first-year community college students who are 26 years or older.

**24:** Average age of a college applicant in Ontario.

**11:** Percentage of Ontario community college students with dependent children.

**84:** Percentage of college students with dependent children who are older than 24.

**34:** Percentage of community college students who come directly from high school.

**Amanda Powell, 29, Child and Youth Work Graduate:**



Amanda Powell (left) with nephew Isiah Byer, 5 (front) and niece Arianae Byer, 9. She is a graduate of Sheridan College's child and youth worker program. (RICK MADONIK)

“I had to pay a \$300 college fee in the summer out of the rent by arranging with property management. I was trying to end the cycle and the missing piece was education. Now I’ve been

hired by the Peel school board. It's made the difference between surviving day-to-day and a career that changes my family's path."

**Imealia Hochoy-Mckenzie**, 26, Child and Youth Work Graduate:



Imealia Hochoy-McKenzie (centre) with Tsana Mahoney , 7 (left) and Tristan Johnson. (RICK MADONIK)

"I came back to school to better my life, and I wanted to be a role model for my daughter Tsana, who's 7. I worked two jobs during school and it was challenging."

Child and Youth Work Graduate (and Imealia's partner) **Tristan Johnson**, 29: "It was worth all the difficulty going to school. It feels like my destiny to help kids."

**Laura Sky**, Filmmaker:



Filmmaker Laura Sky made a documentary focusing on single mothers who struggle to get an education. (RICK MADONIK)

“The people in the film were really gutsy to talk about issues of poverty – some had to use the food bank, some were working three jobs. But education was an opportunity to build the lives they wished for, for the whole family. It was very courageous to talk in spite of the stigma.”

**Maher Ghalayini**, associate dean, Sheridan’s School of Applied Health and Community Services:



Maher Ghalayini is associate dean, School of Applied Health, at Sheridan College. (RICK MADONIK)

“Our goal is to try to understand the challenges our students face in their everyday lives as they navigate the education sector; whether it’s disabilities or economic issues, having to use food banks or pay their tuition deposit from their rent money ... these are issues facing not just racialized students, but students of all backgrounds.”

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