

A teacher with passion

By promoting enthusiasm in her students, Catherine Kenney tries to 'create a little piece of heaven in the classroom'

BY PAULINE TAM

CROSBY, Ont. · If this were Catherine Kenney's classroom, griping would be outlawed. But at this lakeside retreat in the Ottawa Valley, the talk is about rising tuition and growing class sizes, a shrinking workforce and the exploitation of part-time staff, students with unrealistic expectations and their demanding parents.

Around this circle of educators, the challenges of teaching at Ontario's community colleges are a constant theme.

"We struggle to bring people with real-world experience into the classroom, but it's not enough," says one teacher.

Another expresses frustration at the reluctance of employers to share responsibility for job training. "Isn't our job to teach students the fundamentals of how to learn?"

Summoning her unwavering optimism, Ms. Kenney does all she can to lighten the tone. "Ultimately, we're creating citizenry," she says. "We're teaching people that will take over the world. Isn't that powerful?"

There are perfunctory nods and affirmations, but it isn't long before the conversation takes a sombre turn again. At the end of the discussion, Ms. Kenney encourages her colleagues to promote innovative teaching, which is the theme of this conference she helped organize.

Later, the 48-year-old Algonquin College teacher acknowledges the pressures facing her and her colleagues. After a winter of unrest, during which the province's 8,000 unionized college teachers nearly walked off the job, faculty at Ontario's 24 community colleges are still grappling with low morale and heavy workloads. Not many are like Ms. Kenney, who remains unabashedly passionate about teaching.

In her desire "to create a little piece of heaven" in the classroom, she admits to devoting more time to her job than the union would like. "I'm not completely naïve. I just like to live in a naïve state as much as possible," she says with a deep belly laugh.

As is her habit when clowning around, Ms. Kenney crosses her eyes and contorts her wildly animated face. Not surprisingly for someone with such a theatrical personality, the arts is her first love.

Ms. Kenney's efforts to promote creative learning — along with her contributions to arts education — have won her Algonquin's top teaching prize this year. After learning she had received the \$500 award, Ms. Kenney devoted herself to two tasks. The first was to donate her prize money to the college's student bursary fund. The second was to write a thank-you note to her 82-year-old father, who taught sociology at Algonquin until he retired 15 years ago.

In expressing her gratitude to the man she considers a lifelong mentor, Ms. Kenney did what she routinely asks her students to do: Pay tribute to someone who influenced their life. "The one thing we need to do before we step forward into an adult world is to acknowledge goodwill, acknowledge gratitude, then move on," she says. "It's not something that we do in our society."

To Ms. Kenney, fuzzy feelings don't preclude learning. At a time when teachers are being urged to focus on technical training and up-to-date job skills, Ms. Kenney tries to expand her students' outlook by exposing them to philosophy, history, and theatre.

Until earlier this year, she ran the



After winning Algonquin's top teaching prize, history and ethics instructor Catherine Kenney donated the \$500 prize to the college's bursary fund, and wrote her 82-year-old father — a retired professor and her mentor — a thank-you note.

ALGONQUIN COLLEGE AT A GLANCE

Full-time students: 11,645
Continuing Education: 15, 894
Faculty: 511 full-time, 1,978 part-time
Geographic origin: 97% Canadian, 3% foreign
Leading origins of Canadian students: Ottawa, Lanark, Renfrew
Leading origins of foreign students: Asia, Middle East, Africa
President: Robert Gillett
Operating budget: \$174 million

Research budget: \$8.7 million

THE CLASS OF 2004

Class size: 5,104, 4% larger than Class of 2003
Diplomas: 65% diplomas; 35% certificates
Base annual tuition: \$2,263
Geographic origin: 80% from Ottawa

and region; 15% from other parts of Ontario; 5% from foreign countries
Gender: 48% male, 52% female
Largest program: business administration

Smallest program: security and alarm systems technician
Convocation speakers: Barbara Farber, businesswoman; Susan Schmalz, educator; Jim Munson, senator; Sean Conway, former politician.

launched in 1995. The program's performance arm, The Algonquin Theatre Company, was founded by her father, Roy LaBerge, and still produces plays during the school year.

Her signature courses include Canadian history and personal ethics. In the latter class, she spices up character education with a little Plato, Aristotle and Socrates. Even students who snicker at the course end up learning

Ms. Kenney recounts the story of one student who complained to her sister, after being assigned to draw up a list of qualities she liked about herself. The disgruntled student was stunned when her sister replied with an e-mail full of reasons why her family valued her.

"This student was so moved that when she came to class and told us the story, she was crying," recalls Ms. Kenney.

like a two-hour Oprah class. They came, they laughed, they cried."

More recently, Ms. Kenney taught her first class delivered entirely over the Internet. The online course was designed to teach students self-directed learning. By allowing them the latitude to dream up their own projects, Ms. Kenney was amazed by the calibre of work her students turned in.

"One set up a woodworking shop in his basement and created a mandala in

hand. Another created a n disc charting the history of his home country. The quality of work was phenomenal."

Her methods may seem but, in an age when knowledge is accessible, Ms. Kenney the importance of fostering passion for learning.

"What you're doing is for whatever is in a person self-esteem, that gives the feeling, and that gives worth," she says. "It's about and trying to reach some. When that core is touched,

in her own life, learning gle at an early age. The children born and raised in area, Ms. Kenney remembered by her siblings who covered their nine-year-old illiterate. "I could read it but something in my brain low me to connect the letter," she says. "Back then, I erred stupid."

Her father refused to be read with his daughter. She barely survived grade was really shy. I sat up a wore glasses, and I never.

It wasn't until high school found her voice. She discovered music and theatre, which she used in school plays. She five on the student council. Ms. Kenney felt valued. Classrooms outside the classrooms were still a burden; her peers, she had to work hard for an average grade.

By the time she graduated university — first with an philosophy degree, then in education — Ms. Kenney solved to become a role model for students who struggle in life.

"I think I have a privilege cause of my own ex-school, I don't automatically students are lazy," she observed wondering about the What's really happening? What's motivating them? What's making them move forward?

Over the years, teaching became a calling, it had become a calling through turbulence in 1980, after her marriage and she was left to raise her own. Ms. Kenney made by working as a supplier to supplement her income, dinner-theatre company.

In 1985, due largely to her act like an expert on Cary," she was hired to teach Algonquin. Three years came a full-time fact adding ethics and theatre duties.

Her impact on students found. Recently, Ms. Kenney voice-mail from a former called to express her gratitude years after taking Ms. Kenney course, the young woman an old assignment, and of what the class had taught.

Earlier this year, Ms. Kenney a reunion with three former students. It had been years they had last seen each other. Ms. Kenney was amazed by the messages that took away from her.

"They were quoting: that I had taught in the classroom. Ridiculous stuff like it's ferent, and it's OK. I shocked to the core. But myself in the classroom students know it's OK. The model was: Ultimate model what you teach."