



Laurentian University nursing professor Emily Donato (front) co-ordinates the nursing student externship program, which gives students the chance to work in an occupational health setting. Priscilla Pichette-Polson, Leonard Polson and Angela Shawanda are on placement at the Occupational Health Clinic in Sudbury.

Photo: Laura Stradiotto

Bridging the health gap; Program sends nursing students into workplace to improve health

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A group of nursing students hopes to bridge the gap between occupational **Health** and First Nations communities.

Three Laurentian University senior nursing students have begun a placement at the Occupational **Health** Clinic in Sudbury. Staffed by a team of **Health**-care professionals and researchers, the **Health** clinic provides occupational **Health** services to workplaces.

"It's sharing of knowledge, our culture" and providing insight into First Nations, said Leonard Polson, who intends to use his nursing training and experience in an occupational setting when he and his wife return to home to work in the Long Point First Nation in Quebec.

Polson, his wife, Priscilla Pichette-Polson, and Angela Shawanda, are fourth-year nursing students participating in a nursing externship program.

The program matches senior nursing students with workplaces interested in improving

their occupational **Health** environment.

"We're so isolated, a lot of the smaller communities don't know where to go for occupational **Health**," said Shawanda, who is originally from Wikwemikong.

Because of what they've learned so far in occupational **Health**, the students are taking a second look at **Health** issues in their communities.

Cancer rates in First Nation communities are high.

"When I grew up, I didn't see too many people with cancer," said Shawanda. "Now when I look around, people are dying of cancer and you wonder where it comes from."

The externship started five years ago at Laurentian University as part of a pilot project funded by the Workplace Safety and Insurance Board of Ontario. Today, the program is partially funded by the WSIB, but also by the Ontario Occupational **Health** Nurses Association.

Students take two courses through the summer, which gives them the opportunity to graduate earlier, said Emily Donato, a professor in Laurentian's nursing department.

Beyond the placement walls, the program involves web-based learning and classroom sessions.

Thirty-three Laurentian nursing students - more than half of fourth-year students - are studying in fields across Ontario. Placements are outside the traditional nursing setting; one student is at Atomic Energy of Canada and another at an automotive manufacturer.

Now a registered nurse, Gabriella Parrotta graduated from the nursing program in December, four months earlier than on schedule because she participated in the externship program.

She works closely with physicians for the Occupational **Health** Clinic in Sudbury, looking at individual files and cases and writing reports.

Her experience in occupational **Health** as a student opened her eyes up to opportunities not linked to nursing in the past.

"It made me realize how our role has expanded extensively," Parrotta said.

"We're assisting in research and helping develop policies. With our background in holistic care, we can provide that for workers."

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