

# Couple ties dropouts to job skills knot

By Wally Dennison

**I**T'S a strong marriage of skills and backgrounds as well as of love — a marriage that's helping to generate jobs for high school dropouts.

When Pat Winram and Al Dunsford tied the knot in October, 1987, they were already teamed in running Patal Vocational Preparation Schools Ltd. — centred at 62 Sherbrook Street in Winnipeg and with branches in Portage la Prairie and Steinbach.

The name itself unites the first names of the husband-wife team — a union that blends Winram's 28 years of teaching and education administration with Dunsford's 22 years of work experience in plants across Canada and the United States, 17 of them as an industrial electrician.

And Patal is, unquestionably, innovative. It's devoted solely to training dropouts of 16 to 24 years of age for jobs as parts and inventory clerks with car dealerships, auto parts retailers, jobbers, wholesalers, trucking companies, and recycling firms.

It's funded under the job-entry component of Ottawa's Canadian Jobs Strategy, and results reveal that the program is yielding a healthy return on the public's investment. A total of 146 of the 160 people placed for 13 weeks of on-the-job training won permanent jobs with the same company following OJT. Seventy-five per cent are with auto-sector companies, while the rest are with agricultural and trucking businesses.

More than 100 employers have provided training sites since Winram and Dunsford started Patal in June, 1986 in a rented downtown office.

## Larger premises

From there, they and a staff of five ran the classroom portion of Patal's program in Winnipeg for almost two years. Last April, it was moved into the larger Sherbrook street premises.

That move highlighted the couple's commitment to their enterprise, since the couple bought the seven-room, two-storey house for \$130,000 and spent another \$70,000 renovating and adding to it. It's both their home and their workplace.

The idea itself began taking root in 1982 when Winram and Dunsford met at Assiniboine Community College in Brandon. She was chairman of the college's continuing education

department when Dunsford was hired to train electricians in the programming of computers.

Three years later, Dunsford followed as an instructor of industrial electricity when Winram was seconded for seven months to organize trades training at the newly-opened South Winnipeg Technical Centre in Fort Garry. Both liked the concept of the institution, and it started them thinking about how it could be adapted to an enterprise of their own.

Over the years, Winram had dealt closely with Canada Employment Centres as a job source for students of community colleges. Working with the CECs also took up much of her temporary assignment at the tech centre, as well as her three-year stint in curriculum development with the province's department of education.

All along, employers consistently told her of how helpful it would be if educational institutions offered a clerical training course in auto and truck parts inventories.

"Although the industry wanted it, I couldn't sell the administrations at any of the colleges. In their view, it wouldn't be a money-maker."

Winram grew increasingly disenchanted by their rejections. "There appeared to be no room for flexibility and individualized work training. It seemed numbers were more important than people, who were lost in the shuffle of classes holding up to 60 people."

So, when Ottawa announced its CJS program in 1985, Winram and Dunsford recognized an opportunity to "start our own one-room community school."

## High potential

To prepare their proposal for Patal, they observed classes in parts clerk training at the Northern Alberta Institute of Technology in Edmonton. At that time, it was an apprenticeship trade in Alberta, as well as in Ontario and New Brunswick. The couple adapted their proposal to CJS criteria.

Federal officials approved it after a count of job orders to Canada Employment Centres and a canvass of local employers indicated high employment potential for parts inventory clerks.

As Dunsford says, Patal enables these employers to tap quickly into a ready-made pool of potential workers. He says the school is a more expeditious source of supply than that of a newspaper classified ad, which for one car dealer typically



Al Dunsford and Pat Winram: starting "our own one-room community school."

brings forth more than 200 applications. It would take several days to sift through such a pile for potential interviewees, with no assurance that the person hired would be suitable.

Instead, as a training place host for 13 weeks, an employer gets a person who has already been schooled for 13 weeks by Patal either here, or at its Portage la Prairie and Steinbach locations. The curriculum consists of three weeks of life skills coaching, five of academic upgrading, and five of parts theory and computerized retail sales and inventory control.

By the time the trainees are introduced to employers, they have had hands-on training with microfiche, computers and the catalogues of all major auto parts retailers and manufacturers of cars, trucks and agricultural machinery. However, some,

at their own option, have been trained solely to rebuild parts and engines.

Dunsford visits the workplaces regularly to determine their labor needs, then tries to match each with the appropriate trainees. Contracts are individualized for each training site. Two or three prospects, carrying resumes, may accompany him to an employer to compete for the same training opening.

"We want to give them a taste of the real work world," Dunsford says.

Training allowances for classes and workplace training vary according to each student's family circumstances.

And, as results so far have shown, there's an excellent chance of being hired at the end as an inventory clerk, shipper-receiver, junior parts clerk, parts delivery driver, service writer (writing up services requested by the customer for mechanical repairs), or parts recycler.

## Trained counsellors

In any case, the tasks are demanding since an incorrectly-placed order of auto parts from out of province, for example, could cost a dealer thousands of dollars. He's stuck with the parts.

To groom people for these duties, Winram and Dunsford are teamed with an assistant program co-ordinator, a life skills coach, academic upgrading teacher, parts theory instructor, and junior assistant. Winram and life skills coach Audrey Blain, as trained counsellors, help the trainees with any personal problems, while Dunsford leads a hand whenever any difficulty arises at work.

In Winnipeg, Ottawa's CJS has funded Patal for \$200,000 in each of its first two years, and it now has \$223,800 for a 36-week period ending April 7. Its schools in Portage la Prairie and Steinbach have received \$100,000 and \$60,000, respectively, in each of two years.

Patal's success was instrumental in getting Manitoba's department of labor to designate parts inventory clerk as an apprenticeship trade last fall, and the school now has a contract with the province to produce such certified apprentices.

## Outstanding example

Its existence provides openings into the job market for school dropouts whose chances at employment would otherwise be virtually nil. Half the trainees previously knew the work world only through casual jobs. To apply, a person must have been jobless and out of the school system for at least three months.

Gordon Thompson, a 23-year-old former epileptic, is perhaps the most outstanding example of Patal's potential. For the past 18 months, he has worked as a stockroom and counter clerk at a north-end auto parts retailer, which is now sponsoring him for six weeks of apprenticeship training as a parts person.

When Thompson came to Patal in 1986 on referral from a local agency he had been unemployed for six years and had been fired many times before that. But the prospect of a job through Patal renewed the embittered man's hope. He took advantage of a new brain surgery technique and underwent one operation which removed the epilepsy that had failed him in earlier jobs.