How will you remember 2016? Probably through these faces.

PAGES 5-17
**Fly brain’ idea explores memory, learning disabilities**

By PAUL MAYNE

A specific region of the fly brain—known as the " mushroom body"—the learning and memory center—is quite similar to that of humans. The fly brain is a lot more complicated than just that, Kramer said, with 70% of their genes similar to our own.

"Many of the genes mutated in individuals with neurodevelopmental disorders are implicated in epigenetic gene regulation," he continued. "It looks nothing like a mammalian brain, but the cellular molecular mechanisms of learning and memory are also the same in flies and humans. They are a good model forstudying gene regulation.

Male fruit fly court females by vibrating their wings as a courting song. However, the effort is all for naught if the female fly has recently mated, or if she rejects the mating attempt, as other flies cannot be too turned off or it's order for memory to fail," Kramer said. "And that's memory. A lot of processes, like addition and neurodevelopment, are related to proper gene regulation. We want to understand more about how these mechanisms work. We know gene regulation is important, but we don't know which genes are regulated specifically.

This is a challenging problem because the brain is a very complex organ in specific regions of the brain and how specific genes are related to specific regions and how—and we don't even have a clue how to do that."

Among the elite

At one point, when Kramer was an athlete in Alberta's learning in the degrees, fly flies have thus far

2001, he joined the fly lab at Western, where he has been working with a host of researchers on the regulatory aspect of memory.

In addition to the new appointments:

- Professor Tam Nguyen, a psychologist at the University of Western Ontario, has been promoted to Tier 1 CRC in Neuroscience.

- Professor Frank Neufeld, a biologist at the University of Western Ontario, has been appointed the new Tier 2 CRC in Neuroscience.

- Professor Jamie Kramer, a professor in both the Faculty of Science and the Schulich School of Medicine & Dentistry, was recently named a new Tier 2 CRC in Neuroscience.

- Professor Lorna Laidlaw, a health economist at the University of Western Ontario, has been appointed the new Tier 2 CRC in Neuroscience.

- Professor Paul Mayne, a sociologist at the University of Western Ontario, has been appointed the new Tier 2 CRC in Neuroscience.

- Professor Angela Gauthier, a biochemist at the University of Western Ontario, has been appointed the new Tier 2 CRC in Neuroscience.

- Professor Tony O'Driscoll, a biologist at the University of Western Ontario, has been appointed the new Tier 2 CRC in Neuroscience.

- Professor Leslie McKeown, a psychologist at the University of Western Ontario, has been appointed the new Tier 2 CRC in Neuroscience.

- Professor Thomas Wark, a biologist at the University of Western Ontario, has been appointed the new Tier 2 CRC in Neuroscience.

As we move forward in the realm of memory and learning in general, it’s important to realize that epigenetics and gene regulation play a crucial role in how we learn and remember things. By understanding these mechanisms, we can work towards developing therapies for conditions like autism spectrum disorder, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, and schizophrenia, which are all associated with disruptions in gene regulation.
Teams rise up to the Challenge

BY ADELA TALBOT

In its third year, the World’s Challenge Challenge has become a staple of Western’s International Week. The event sees more than 30 student teams in competition, presenting a unique solution to a global challenge, in front of a panel of judges that includes academic and community leaders. The winning team members each receive $1,000 to help fund a Western-sanctioned international learning opportunity. This year, the winning team will also move on to compete in the first International World’s Challenge Challenge in May 2017 for an opportunity to win $30,000 ($10,000 per team member).

**FIRST PLACE**
Addressing the sustainability of contemporary agricultural food systems
Linta Mustafa, Health Sciences
Anahita Khanmohammadi, Health Sciences
Robert Celik, Geography

Most people are unaware of the severe environmental and social implications of our current food system and the negative impact of the meat we are consuming. Raising livestock for food is extremely inefficient and contributes to global food insecurity and inequality. Each year more than 70 billion animals are raised for food across the world. Livestock consumed huge volumes of water and produced methane, a harmful greenhouse gas that contributes to global warming.

The teams plan is to encourage responsible food consumption and production through low-input meat alternatives, such as edible cricket products. These food products have the greatest potential to increase healthy food accessibility, locally and globally, with the least environmental cost. With targeted education and access to alternative protein sources, it is possible to minimize the environmental impact of the food we eat. This program is accessible to anyone, creating an economic opportunity for the communities involved.

**SECOND PLACE**
Sustainable empowerment for women in Tanzania
Stephanie Huff, Occupational Science, PhD candidate
Andrea Burke, International Relations
Gagan Singh, Microbiology & Immunology

Gender violence and gender inequality has led to an unfortunate number of girls and women living in Tanzania. A number of sociocultural factors in the country perpetuate poverty and violence, while a lack of resources has victims of gendered violence from opportunities to move past and improve their situations. Environmental degradation has also exacerbated socio-economic and political factors, contributing to unparalleled numbers of stateless persons.

The team’s plan is to train local women and girls in rural areas searching for firewood, where many of them are assaulted. Economic self-sufficiency as a result of the project will provide women and girls with the means to lift themselves out of poverty and violence.

**THIRD PLACE**
Developing economic profiles for refugees
Gareth Grauwelle, Political Science
Jasmine Wang, Medical Science
Amy Wang, Computer Science

The international community now faces the greatest refugee crisis since the end of the Second World War, with the numbers of displaced people more than tripling in the past 10 years as the Syrian conflict has intensified. The need for inclusive refugee camps will only compound in coming decades with a number of socioeconomic, environmental and political factors contributing to unparalleled numbers of stateless persons.

The team’s solution: to provide refugees with opportunities to build financial credit profiles through Blockchain technology, helping them to find work opportunities during and after the migration process. As many refugees struggle to provide necessary documentation, leaving them unable to access banking and credit services, Blockchain creates a public ledger of all financial transactions, accessible to anyone over the internet – refugees would not need to establish a financial profile with a bank, as transactions can be performed over Bitcoin, of which an instant record appears. The online currency automatically creates a portable economic identity owned by the individual permanently, one easily transferable and verifiable. Blockchain provides a secure way to track economic activity, creating an economic profile not available to them otherwise.

How will you remember 2016? Probably through these faces.
BASEL AL NOSERAT

Basel Al Noserat, a 25-year-old undergraduate student, grew up in Syria, at a time when the country was at peace. Tragic events would change all of that. At the age of 15, the civil war erupted and the fears that had once driven his parents to leave their home. But through it all, he refused to give up on what he wanted to accomplish.

This year was the first in Canada for Al Noserat, who is the first Syrian citizen to study at Western under the university’s Syrian Refugee Student Awards. The program covers tuition and living costs for eligible candidates. It is here he hopes to finally leave the nightmares of war behind, and embrace his dreams for the future.

Al Noserat spent the past year studying at the Western English Language Centre at the Faculty of Education, in order to improve his English. His plans are to study Civil Engineering. The degree will enable him to one day help rebuild his shattered country, as well as give back to his family in Syria.

ADELA TALBOT // WESTERN NEWS

THE DEPARTED

The year marked the last year on campus for a handful of well-known, long-serving administrators at Western.

Thérèse Quigley, one of the most respected and decorated athletic leaders in all of Canadian Interuniversity Sport, retired from her post as Director of Sports and Recreation Services. Over the course of her career, Quigley earned a national reputation as an innovator in interuniversity sport, recreation programming, fundraising, facility development and student leadership.

Susan Grindrod, Associate Vice-President of Housing & Ancillary Services & Liquor Licence Coordinator, retired at the end of June after 34 years at Western. Grindrod was just 29 years old when she stepped into the role of Associate Director of Housing in 1982. She oversaw the construction of six new residence buildings during her time, including Alumni House, and her team has been praised for helping Western stand out as one of Canada’s best student experiences.

In October, after more than a decade of service, Gitta Kulczycki left her post as Vice-President of Resources and Operations. During her time at Western, she was responsible for initiatives including the Campus Master Plan and the President’s Advisory Committee on Environment and Sustainability. Kulczycki accepted a position as Vice-President of Finance and Administration at the University of Alberta.

After 36 years at Western, Teaching Support Centre Director Debra Dawson retired in August, but not before receiving the Chris Knapper Lifetime Achievement Award from the Society for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education. The award recognizes the long-time Western employee’s contributions to teaching, learning and educational development in Canadian higher education.

GENEVIEVE MOREAU // SPECIAL TO WESTERN NEWS

CHRISTMAS MASS

Christ the King University Parish
(Roman Catholic)

warmly invites you to join us for
Christmas Eve Mass
Saturday December 24, 2016 at 7:30 p.m.

Christmas Day Mass
Sunday December 25, 2016 at 10:30 a.m.

‘The Chapel’ at Revera’s Windermere on the Mount
1468 Richmond Street, London
(SE corner of Richmond & Windermere)

kings.uwo.ca/campus-ministry

PAUL MAYNE // WESTERN NEWS

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SUSAN MUMM

When Susan Mumm was appointed the 12th Principal of Brescia University College in July, there were plans for a large installation ceremony. However, the former Dean of Arts and Science at Queen’s University felt a ‘party’ in her honour wasn’t necessary—the $25,000 budgeted for the welcoming could be put to better use. She requested the money be directed toward supporting new student awards.

Mumm feels a good leader is someone who can find the power to “unlock potential” in others. With an extra $25,000 going in the pockets of the students, it’s safe to say Mumm may have the key.

“Our vision centres on our students graduating as women leaders who contribute actively and positively to society,” Mumm said. “We know 46 per cent of our students receive some form of financial support funded by Brescia, and I want to ensure the focus continues to be about our students and their success. The more opportunities that we can find to make this happen, the more successful we will be at realizing this vision.”

DOUBLE HOMECOMING

This year, Western's Homecoming celebrations and events were split over two weekends. In May, Western officials announced Homecoming 2016 would be moved to Saturday, Oct. 22, as an effort to address a variety of concerns associated with an unsanctioned street party on Broughdale Avenue. Labelled “Homecoming Saturday,” that weekend featured a football-centric experience for participants. Planned faculty reunions, as well as the Alumni Awards of Merit and Golden Anniversaries dinners, still took place as originally planned on Reunion Weekend, Sept. 30-Oct. 2.

Though the initial announcement in the spring placed emphasis on a desire to quell the Broughdale partying by spreading Homecoming events over two weekends, officials later noted the move was an effort to moose Homecoming to a later date to accommodate students and alumni and keep in mind fall break exams and the start of the academic calendar. A date for the 2017 celebrations has yet to be set.

And while there were some concerns over a double Homecoming resulting in a doubling of the Broughdale festivities, both Homecoming weekends in 2016 went off without a hitch.

JOHN LEONARD

A renowned John Milton scholar, John Leonard, who teaches in the Department of English and Writing Studies, received a handful of accolades in 2016. Earlier this year, Leonard was awarded the Western Humanities Research Achievement in Research, an honour that recognizes faculty members with outstanding international reputations for their contributions in research—one of the defining hallmarks of a university. In March, he received the Distinguished University Professorship Award, which acknowledges sustained excellence in scholarship over a substantial career at Western.

Leonard also piloted a new undergraduate course this year, “Winter is Coming: A Game of Thrones.” Working with Kinesiology professor Jim Dickey, Frayne began testing ice hockey goalie equipment and its effects on the body. Leonard received a generous research grant to explore femoroacetabular impingement, a condition where the bones of the hip are abnormally shaped and begin rubbing against each other, causing damage to the joint. Frayne explored a potential cause of this issue—the equipment.

Frayne looked at the impact of the equipment on the body, as well as on performance—the latter since creating an industry partnership with Reebok-CCM Hockey. Frayne’s findings led to performance measures toward the creation of the next generation of goalie pads. In fact, the new Extreme Flex II goalie pads from Reebok-CCM are designed using Frayne’s research.

RYAN FRAYNE

Every goalie who hates to let a puck by—even through the dreaded five-hole—will take keen interest in the work of Ryan Frayne, a fourth-year PhD candidate in the Wolf Orthopaedic Biomechanics Laboratory, located at the Fowler Kennedy Sport Medicine Clinic.

Frayne’s work can translate directly to how goalie equipment is designed. His research is a study of the first four volumes of Martin’s A Song of Ice and Fire, and he’s focused on the bones of the hip. Specifically, he looked at the impact the equipment has on the body and its effects on performance. Frayne and Dickey partnered with Kinesiology professor Jim Dickey, and they focused on the impact of the equipment on the body. Frayne’s findings led to performance measures toward the creation of the next generation of goalie pads. In fact, the new Extreme Flex II goalie pads from Reebok-CCM are designed using Frayne’s research.
A discovery that the most common variant of the HIV virus is also the "wimpiest" will help doctors better treat millions of individuals around the world suffering from the deadly disease, Microbiology & Immunology professor Eric Arts has discovered.

One of the world’s leading HIV/AIDS researchers, Arts, a Canada Research Chair in HIV Pathogenesis and Viral Control, said HIV is one of the most diverse viruses that infect the human population, and to treat these patients you need to know how they respond to treatment when infected.

For more than a decade and a half, Arts has explored how the various strains of the HIV virus advance in the body. He sought out differences in the strains and how those differences might impact treatment.

In screening approximately 300 women in Zimbabwe, Thailand and Uganda newly infected with HIV starting in the early 2000s, Arts found Subtype C replicated poorly and slowly in patients – earning it the ‘wimpy’ moniker among its fellow subtypes. And with Subtype C being the dominant strain in the HIV population, Arts’ findings may soon have an impact on potential treatments for HIV patients.

Gunjan Mhapankar went from being a 15-year-old and new to Canada to an audience with Queen Elizabeth in just six years. Cheers to that.

As a young teen in Vancouver wanting to learn about her new community and country, Mhapankar, 21, began volunteering at organizations like Big Brothers/Big Sisters, the Greater Vancouver Food Bank, Science World and BC211.

Her advocacy efforts led the first-year Schulich School of Medicine & Dentistry student to the steps of Buckingham Palace this summer, after winning a Queen’s Young Leaders Award, which celebrates exceptional young people taking the lead in their communities and using their skills to transform lives.

Only 60 awards are presented worldwide; Mhapankar was one of two Canadians.

If that wasn’t enough, Mhapankar also spoke at the One Young World Summit in Ottawa this fall, where she shared her story with more than 1,300 youth from 196 countries.
RICHARD McLAREN

From generating world headlines with two groundbreaking World Anti-Doping Agency’s (WADA) reports, the latest released last spring, to his appointment to the Order of Canada, Western Law professor Richard McLaren, HBA’68, LLB’71, has had a stellar year.

McLaren has become one of the strongest voices in international sport, having placed his stamp on inquiries ranging from steroids in Major League Baseball, to drug testing cover-ups by USA Track & Field, to widespread cheating by Russian athletes on the eve of the 2016 Rio Summer Olympics.

Released in June 2016, a WADA report led by McLaren found the Russian government, as well as its security services and sporting authorities, colluded to hide widespread doping across “a vast majority” of winter and summer sports, including the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi. Despite these dual findings, however, the International Olympic Committee allowed Russian athletes to compete at the 2016 Rio Summer Olympics.

Nevertheless, what McLaren helped expose has been applauded across sports – and beyond.

CONCUSSION RESEARCHERS

Concussions dominated numerous discussions for Western researchers in 2016.

The Schulich School of Medicine & Dentistry continued to host the See the Line initiative with the Ontario Player Development League and Burlington Youth Soccer Club to highlight cutting-edge concussion research from across the university and community.

Alexandra Harriss, a Health Sciences PhD student, worked with Concussion Research Institute of Canada and faculty to develop a new blood test that identifies whether or not an adolescent athlete has suffered a concussion.

Researchers working under Western’s BrainsCAN initiative will likewise be studying concussion as part of its ongoing research in cognitive neuroscience and imaging.

Theo Versteegh, BSc’98, MSc’10, PhD’16, developed Top-Spin 360, a weighted football helmet used to strengthen the neck of athletes, an effort that could help prevent concussions.

BrainsCAN

It was quite the celebration earlier this year as the largest research grant in the university’s history – a $66-million Canada First Research Excellence Fund (CFREF) grant – supported the much anticipated work of the BrainsCAN: Brain Health For Life initiative.

BrainsCAN will bring together researchers from across campus under one unified theme: to understand the brain and its role in human health.

BrainsCAN will ensure the university is well positioned to move forward and ensure a positive impact for patients worldwide.

INDIGENOUS STRATEGIC INITIATIVES COMMITTEE

Looking to engage Indigenous Peoples at every level of study, work and research, Western’s Indigenous Strategic Initiative Committee (ISIC) was formed to develop the university’s first-ever multi-year Indigenous Strategic Plan.

In consultation with the Indigenous Postsecondary Education Council, Western formed the committee to consult with members of the campus and local/regional First Nations communities over the past two years to develop the plan. Western sees three local First Nations communities in close proximity – Chippewas of the Thames First Nation, Oneida Nation of the Thames and Munsee Delaware Nation.

The approval of the Indigenous Strategic Plan by the university Senate and Board of Governors signals a historic occasion for Western. Next up, a task force will be formed in the New Year to recommend ways to implement the goals outlined in the plan.

The ISIC committee includes, from left: Charlene Robinson, Brian Morin, Jerry White, Myra Robinson, Karen Denhoff, Rick Zeidler and Marcia Stewart. Members not pictured include Candace Marnette, Brent Delabage, Nabil Pitcher, Karen Lamoure, Chantelle Dean, Carol Bylin, Angie Mordich and Susan Hill.

Western is at the forefront of research in the field of cognitive neuroscience. Funding from CFREF will ensure the university is well positioned to move forward and ensure a positive impact for patients worldwide.

BrainsCAN has the potential to radically transform our understanding of the brain, its role in human health and the science that can address and treat brain diseases and disorders.
MAZEN EL-BABA

Born in Lebanon, Mazen El-Baba is drawing together his passion for social justice with his study of neuropsychology to better his community. In September 2015, the second-year Neuroscience graduate student was awarded a Mindsight Innovation Fellowship, which works to de-stigmatize addiction and mental-health issues in the Middle East and Africa by providing grants to researchers in the area, and to support measures such as a mental health hotline.

As many families of Syrian refugees come to Canada, there are those who are newly arrived in one of the world’s longest-standing wars. El-Baba’s own immigration was needed and, this summer, he organized a camp for some of these children, designed to provide opportunities to learn English, connect with local groups and have a summer camp experience.

He sees another unique opportunity by working with Psychology professors Bruce Morton and Daniel Weiss to follow refugees who came to Canada in the event – the first since Canada’s second-ever medal in the decathlon. His bronze is only three decades to medal in the decathlon, which pretty much started the whole snowball and the gigs kept getting bigger,” said Yun. And he knew this was an opportunity he couldn’t pass up.

“It is a great way to see the world. The professional experience was too good to pass up,” said Yun. “It’s a great way to see the world. The professional experience was too good to pass up.”

AMANDA AND MAX

Max Eisen had a story, but Amanda Grzyb helped him find his voice. The result was a powerful memoir of survival.

In March 2010, Eisen, who had spent decades sharing his story of surviving the Holocaust, and Grzyb, a Faculty of Information and Media Studies professor, met on the Simon Wiesenthal Center’s inaugural mission to the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp. The writing process was not the only thing that came to the forefront. The writing process was more challenging than speaking about what he endured.

“Often, when you speak, you have all these time constraints,” Grzyb explained. “You have a particular story that you need to tell and you get to somewhere in 45 minutes or an hour and then it’s it. It is well-rehearsed. But writing and remembering these small details provoked a lot of trauma and adversity may affect children in the camp, part of the ongoing relationship to identify how trauma and adversity may affect children’s learning and development. This is, in turn, can be used to help better prepare children.

The versatility of John Yun, MMus ‘12 (Literature and Performance), a multi-talented performer, was first showcased in the role of contracts artist, jazz pianist and opera tutor, landed him the Associate Conductor role with the internationally acclaimed production of Falstaff, which kicked off this past October with stops in Germany, Italy, Japan, Singapore and Dubai, to name a few.

John Yun credits his time at Western, under the tutelage of Don Wright Faculty of Music professor Stephan Strelic, for setting him on this musical journey, which has already seen him work numerous shows around Ontario and shows such as Sounds of Sinatra, Cosi Fan Tutte, Godspell and Annie.

“Everything ties back to that one summer between first and second year at Western, which pretty much started the whole snowball and the gigs kept getting bigger,” said Yun. And he knew this was an opportunity he couldn’t pass up.

“It is a great way to see the world. The professional experience was too good to pass up.”

The pros far outweigh any cons. There was no way I was going to say no to this.”

VICKIE CROLEY

With one of her athletes taking home a bronze medal in the 2016 Rio Olympic Games, Vickie Croley – the Mustangs’ head coach for track and field – had a good year.

In the lead up to the Games, Croley, the former coach of Olympic track and field star Damian Warner, has been working hard to ensure London-declamative Damian Warner was set up for the best performance possible. Warner certainly didn’t disappoint and in August, became the first Canadian to medal in the decathlon since Dave Steen’s third-place finish at the 1988 Seoul Games.
MAX

For the past two years, Max, a 5-year-old golden retriever, has been a full-time member of the dean’s office team within the Faculty of Law. As a puppy, he started working at the office with his human, System Administrator Compay Merkens – the team bowed him and, soon enough, Max became an office staple.

Today, Max is the faculty’s Canine Ambassador who is, according to his online profile page on the faculty website, “responsible for morale development and the communication of Western, greening the campus, and helping to improve campus life.” He is also the go-to dog for courier deliveries and well-wishing guests.

Office culture has changed with Max around. Everyone is more relaxed. Having a dog around provides an outlet for students, staff and visitors to be friendly and casual, regardless of who they might be and how they might be expected to behave.

Lisa Saksida and Tim Bussey

The purpose behind the research is simple in concept: improve the therapies for degenerative diseases such as Alzheimer’s, Parkinson’s and Huntington’s. But it’s difficult in application – learning, memory, attention and problem-solving. They want to know how the brain does it, how the mechanisms are behind them and what processes are at play when these mental structures break down.

The husband and wife team of Tim Bussey and Lisa Saksida, Scholl School of Medicine and Dentistry professors, brought their wide array of expertise from their translational neuroscience research at the University of Cambridge to their new home at Western earlier this year.

Also serving as core members of Western’s Brain and Mind Institute, the pair are interested in cognition – learning, memory, attention and problem-solving. They want to know how the brain does it, how it’s organized and what processes are at play. They are also curious with what goes wrong with cognition in neuropsychiatric and neurodegenerative diseases like Alzheimer’s, schizophrenia and Huntington’s.

LISA SAKSIDA // WESTERN NEWS

JANET WILLIAMS

How long was Janet Williams at Western? If you glance out her former office window in Middlesex College, you’ll see a lovely, mature 35-year-old beech tree. At one time, there were two. One died about three years ago.

Williams remembers the day they were planted.

When Williams left her office in July, after 46 years at the institution, she was the longest-serving member of the University of Western Ontario Staff Association. The academic counsellor in the Department of Math left campus with a ton of memories, as well as a piece of bark from the ill-fated tree, and another small piece of the trunk doubling as a door stop.

Janet Williams

London born and raised, Williams attended Fanshawe College the second year after it opened. She then continued on to do an Art History degree at the University of Western Ontario, where she met her future husband, Tim Bussey, and they have been married for over 35 years.

In 1971, Williams joined the Department of Math at the University of Western Ontario to work as a part-time administrator. She never thought her job would turn into a nearly half-century career.

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I love it when people are passionate about something. When you walk into Lehnhardt’s room, you will see a collection of Shuttle replicas that lined the walls of his bedroom. "That’s my space forever. It’s my way of helping the mission," Lehnhardt explained. "Most of the time, it just feels like it’s my mission." Lehnhardt has been fascinated with space for as long as he can remember. "I started watching the 135th – and final – launch of the NASA Shuttle Atlantis, " he said. "That was really important for me. I’ve always been an astronaut for the Canadian Space Agency." Lehnhardt has been fascinated with space for as long as he can remember. He has always been an astronaut for the Canadian Space Agency. The Canadian Space Agency’s recently named Dr. Kati Lehnhardt, MD, PhD, to its shortlist of the Top 163 candidates to fill one of two open astronaut positions. Lehnhardt is a board-certified radiologist who has been with the University of Western Ontario for over 10 years. He is currently the associate dean for the Faculty of Medicine at Western. Lehnhardt has been selected as one of the Top 163 candidates to fill one of two open astronaut positions. Lehnhardt has been selected as one of the Top 163 candidates to fill one of two open astronaut positions.
A new study shows the key to Indigenous students’ future success may lie in them knowing more about their past.

Claire Crooks, director of the Faculty of Education’s Centre for School Mental Health, led a team that implemented a mentorship program for Grade 7 and 8 Indigenous students in the Thames Valley District School Board (TVDSB). Groups of students met once a week with an Indigenous adult mentor. Their sessions focused on acquiring skills, in areas like stress management, and combined them with spiritual, physical, mental and emotional teachings based on the traditional First Nations medicine wheel.

Crooks followed the students for two school years – 2011-12 and 2012-13. Study results, which were recently published in the Journal of Primary Prevention, showed those who received mentorship from a member of their community had better cultural connectedness, improved mental health and higher school credit accumulation than peers who were not mentored.

“Knowing who you are is an important task for any youth,” Crooks said. “This program was able to help these Indigenous students develop a positive sense of identity tied to their culture. We can now show with real evidence that when they feel better about themselves, know who they are and understand where they came from, there are hugely positive impacts in almost all other areas of their lives.”

A total of 105 students were followed over the two-year period. Crooks and her team reviewed student report cards and standardized test scores, annually surveyed and interviewed participating students, and spoke with principals and teachers.

Results showed stronger academic success and a markedly increased sense of cultural awareness and pride among mentored students. The mentoring group also scored higher on positive mental health.

Though the study is over, the mentorship program at TVDSB continues to operate. For mentor Mike Cywink, the meetings are a chance to impart what he knows on the younger generation, while also getting something back himself.

“I see the students as teachers for me, as well,” Cywink said. “When I talk about our culture with them, they get enthused and say things like, ‘We want to educate other people about this.’ It makes me take a look at myself to ask if I’m out there doing that as much as I should.”

Cywink felt it was his direction to work with Indigenous youth, to ensure the cultural perspective and teachings continue to be passed along.

“When I work with these students, I see them listening to me and see that I can provide them the tools and the courage to be the voice for the next group of kids,” he said. “Ultimately, I want them to one day be in my position, but to do it better than me and take it further. There’s so much potential in them, I know they can do it.”

Paul McKenzie, superintendent of student achievement in the First Nation, Metis and Inuit portfolio with the TVDSB, says mentoring participants are working with school staff and students to raise awareness and help build a sense of belonging.

“Mentored students bring an understanding of their backgrounds and communities to the schools, and in doing so really help serve to bring this into our collective identities as well,” McKenzie said.

As Canada’s Indigenous youth continue to be disproportionately affected by struggles with mental health, suicide and higher than average rates of leaving school, and the country looks to implement calls to action presented in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission report, Crooks hopes the study will spark conversations in Canadian schools about the role they can play in the success of today’s Indigenous youth.

“Ministries of education have an obligation to provide programming and supports that are inclusive of Indigenous culture and ways of knowing. For a long time, our school systems weren’t designed to meet the needs of these students, and the evidence proves it really does work.”

A recent Western study showed Indigenous students who received mentorship from a member of their community had better cultural connectedness, improved mental health and high school credit accumulation than peers who were not mentored.