

Northern lights shine on learners

If you haven't any qualifications, a Yorkshire college wants you - and that includes the homeless. Mary Hampshire reports

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When she was a girl, Ruth Levi dreamed of becoming a barrister. Instead, the 64-year-old, who attended 13 different schools during the Second World War, ended up in a factory. "Every time I had an opportunity to study, life got in the way," she recalls, sadly. That was until she saw a leaflet for Northern College, near Barnsley, South Yorkshire.

"It said: 'Give yourself a second chance.' Those words spoke to me. I thought: 'I'm going to have a go'," says Mrs Levi, from Castleford, West Yorkshire. Despite being diagnosed with breast cancer in the first term, she refused to miss lectures for hospital appointments.

Her determination paid off. Mrs Levi achieved a Northern College Diploma and a Sheffield Hallam University Certificate this year, which counts for the first year of a degree. She started a health sciences degree at York University this year. "Studying is my idea of heaven." Despite her illness she still says: "Attending college was the best year of my life."

Northern College is one of eight FE colleges nationally offering free education and accommodation to people with few or no qualifications. Around 5,000 students attend one and two-day courses each year and 85 students enrol on nine-month diplomas annually, half of whom live in. Based at Wentworth Castle, a listed 18th-century mansion, it is an inspirational retreat from the demands of everyday life with 38 acres of grounds and gardens and an ostentatious library which was formerly a ballroom.

"Many get hooked after attending our short courses," explains Karl Barton, marketing and public affairs co-ordinator. "Our aim is to break down fear and barriers to education, bringing out students' latent talent," he adds.

Established in 1979, Northern College is funded by the European Community, local education authorities and the Further Education Funding Council. Most students, who range from 21 to 80, come from eight local authorities including Barnsley, Doncaster, Rotherham, Sheffield, Huddersfield and Bradford. To be eligible for free tuition, accommodation, meals and childcare facilities, students must be over 21 and not have a degree. Bursaries are also available. School-age children attend local schools and transport is provided.

Diploma modules include sociology, social policy, history, European studies,

politics, economics, psychology and women's studies, law, race and ethnicity. The college has also played a key role in breathing new life into communities where traditional industry has died. Each year 1,000 former miners, many of them unemployed, study part-time through the college's Coalfields Learning Programme.

Sean Price, 36, from Rotherham, who has three CSEs, has just enrolled on a residential diploma course after attending a three-day computer course for beginners. He was a mining sub-contractor for 11 years and has chosen to live in a caravan, which he returns to at weekends. "I got stuck in a rut," he says. "I earned good money from mining and had bags of experience but when it came to getting another job I failed at the first hurdle: qualifications. "I was worried I might be too thick for college because I'm not good at detail. I've enjoyed learning and do not feel so frightened by it. I'm going to use this opportunity to change my life while I've the chance."

Nancy Robinson, 73, from Hull, a former hairdresser and factory worker, has taken eight short courses. "Some of us older people who've worked all our lives want to make up for lost time," she says. "I'll take this away on disc and work on it at home. My aim is to build a website for local pensioners. It keeps my brain ticking over." Others who have completed the diploma have gone on to a degree, something few dreamed possible.

Sylvia Wright, 65, a former lollipop lady of 18 years from Sheffield, enrolled on a residential diploma course with her husband Ron, 69. "When the tutors suggested we try for university," she says, "we thought they were joking. We worried about being the old fogies of the class but the tutors would not allow us to feel like that. Everyone was a student first and foremost." Age wasn't an issue. "We both look and feel five years younger," adds Sylvia, who is in the second year of her English degree at Sheffield Hallam University. Ron graduated this year with a 2.1.

Three years ago, Jim Fletcher, 48, from Sheffield was sleeping rough in a park. His main goal in life was how to survive the next day. He explains: "I became homeless after my marriage broke down in 1991 and suffered personal and financial problems. In 1997, things were so bad I slept rough for three months in a park. "I'd always wanted to make something more of myself. But coming from a one-parent family, and as a male of the household, I was expected to go to work.

"Education was not a priority. After that I couldn't really afford the time or the courses. "I found studying on the diploma course tough. It was hard to plan ahead for essays. After years of working outside as a landscape gardener, I also found it difficult being in a classroom. "I had highs and lows. I ran away three times and was very close to packing it all in. But the tutors were really supportive. I found other students an inspiration. A second opportunity at education has changed my life. "For the first time, I feel a success," says Mr Fletcher, who has

started an environmental conservation degree at Sheffield Hallam University. "It's a long way from waking up in a sleeping bag with a day to kill."