

## Personal Stories

The following personal stories are taken from:

### **Moving On**

A guide for students with disabilities making the transition to post-secondary education

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### Holly Bartlett

Holly Bartlett is a fourth year honours psychology student at St. Francis Xavier University in Antigonish, Nova Scotia. For three years, Holly was in the business program, after which she changed to psychology. She is presently applying to grad school. She is visually impaired and has a guide dog named Willow, who helps her live independently.

Holly like to take on new challenges, and isn't easily intimidated. One of the reasons she decided to go to St. Francis Xavier was because most students with visual impairments do not choose this campus. They usually choose to attend St. Mary's University, affiliated with the Atlantic Centre, which specializes in accommodating students with disabilities on the East coast.

Holly says that although Saint Francis Xavier had never had a student with a visual impairment as severe as hers, the university staff was excellent in accommodating her needs. "there is a lot to be said about going where nobody else has been before," she says. "Rules have not been formed yet and the staff is much more flexible in accommodating one's particular needs when their experience is new."

Holly's advice for a secondary student who would like to pursue a post-secondary education is to spend lots of time scouting out schools before accepting an offer of admission. Holly was very thorough when transitioning from secondary to post-secondary education. She says that as a result she felt as prepared as one can be for her first year of post-secondary study. One of the keys for her was her involvement with a group called the Atlantic Provinces Special Education Authority (APSEA). This is a governmental agency funded by the Atlantic Provinces to prepare students with visual and hearing impairments to transition from secondary to post-secondary education. APSEA holds a post-secondary week in the spring for students in the Atlantic provinces. During this week, participants discuss and role-play issues such as how to disclose to your professor that you have a disability. Holly had a transition facilitator at APSEA who provided information on all the campuses she was considering attending. When Holly chose an institution to attend, APSEA sent a staff member which Holly to her new campus to help her and Willow become acquainted with the area. Holly also visited the university in August and introduced herself to all her professors. She discussed her required accommodation, such as more time on tests and extensions on assignments in order to have time to electronically scan any research text.

Holly says she has learned many study skills over her time at university, which have helped her become a more independent student. She makes sure to start early on all big assignments. She finds it very difficult to research in the library as none of the computers at St. Francis Xavier are accessible to visually impaired persons. As a result, Holly must make appointments with the librarian to find resources for her work. Occasionally, research texts must be ordered from other libraries, which can take two to three days. After the library has received the books, the pages must be scanned into the computer so she can read the material. No assignments can be completed at the last minute. Holly started developing these habits in her first year, but as the years have gone by and her course load has become heavier, she has perfected her strategy. This is especially crucial for lectures such as mathematics, where it is critical to follow what is written by the professor. In addition to starting early on assignments, Holly advises that students read all lecture notes before

the class begins.

Holly is not currently involved with a disability students' group. There is no such group on her campus. However, from 1998-2000, she sat on the NEADS Board of Directors as the Nova Scotia Representative.

Outside of classes, Holly loves to travel and has taken advantage of opportunities to visit Mexico and Guatemala at spring break with her school. No challenge is too great for Holly.

Jennifer Eddy

Jennifer Eddy is about to complete her first year at Cambrian College in Ontario. She is a business administration student who says she is extremely happy with her program. Jennifer has a moderate visual impairment to the degree that people often cannot notice her disability.

Jennifer says her high school service provider highly recommended Cambrian College to her, because the school provides very good accommodation for students with visual impairments. Once she began at Cambrian, Jennifer spent some time determining who she should turn to for accommodations. After she discovered the right supports, Jennifer says, college life was simplified.

Jennifer took a proactive approach to ensure that she had a successful transition to post-secondary school. As soon as she made her decision to attend Cambrian, she made an appointment to visit the Glenn Crombie Centre – the office for disability services on campus. She met the coordinator and ordered her books-on-tape early. Once she selected her classes, she visited the professor for each course and gave them a note from the Glenn Crombie Centre. The note explained her disability and the accommodations that she should receive. Jennifer says her professors have been very helpful when dealing with her needs. They often give her copies of class overheads to help her take more complete notes, and she has been allowed extra time and a quiet room in which to write her exams. She has also maintained a good relationship with her service provider at the Glenn Crombie Centre. She stops by the office every couple of months and lets her service provider know how her studies have progressed.

Jennifer has found that college has provided a better learning

environment for her than secondary school. Attending classes all day at high school would cause strain on her eyes. Currently, her time is split between attending classes and individual work time, which she says is ideal for her. Jennifer also finds it very helpful to ensure she completes all her assigned readings before class, and to get project outlines ahead of time, sometimes her professors have been quite helpful with.

Winning three scholarships – an entrance scholarship to Cambrian, a graduating scholarship from her secondary school and the MCTV Broadcasting scholarship – has helped Jennifer pay for her education. She also took a year off between high school and university to raise money for school, and currently cuts down on education-related expenses by living at home.

While she has found her transition to college to be mostly successful, Jennifer says there have been a few things that have created challenges. For one, she says the disability service centre is understaffed and consequently cannot always provide adequate service to a few students with disabilities on campus. For two months, she helped her friend, who is a wheelchair user, to get on and off all the wheelchair lifts and get around the campus, due to the staff shortage.

Jennifer's advises secondary students who would like to pursue post-secondary studies to not be shy. "If you want something, to get it," she says. "Most people won't help unless they really know you need it. Don't let them put you on the back burner."

## Jake Fehr

Jake Fehr graduated last fall with a bachelor of science degree from the University of Calgary. Despite the difficulties posed by being a post-secondary student with a disability, Jake looks back fondly on his time in university.

Fehr, who as a visual impairment and is legally blind, attended high school in the community of Taber, Alberta. Moving from such a small town to one of Canada's larger cities and university campuses would be intimidating in itself, without the added pressure of getting used to a whole new system of learning. But Jake made sure he was ready. In addition to simply spending time in Calgary to get used to city life

before actually moving there, Jake also attended a new student orientation session at the university. He says that the experience of spending a few days with other students on campus during the summer – which he says is now a mandatory component for all new University of Calgary students – was a big help in easing his transition.

“That was one of the biggest things I did (to help prepare myself),” says Jake. “And the orientation gave me a chance to meet with the disability resource centre to introduce myself and see how they could accommodate me.”

Jake’s familiarization with university life didn’t end there. In many ways, it continued throughout his entire post-secondary career. He lived in residence for three years, which in addition to allowing him to get a better sense of the campus by being exposed to it all the time, also meant he didn’t have to worry about transportation to school, cooking or cleaning.

He says he also managed to develop an effective learning and time management strategy over his years at university. Jake says this is something all students should concentrate on right from the start of their post-secondary career.

“In high school, there’s no such thing as study skills or time management,” he says. “It’s important to learn prioritization in university, to spend most of your time on the assignments that are worth more and are due sooner.” Jake also says effective note taking, and learning to pick out things from lectures that will likely be on exams and tests, are important skills to build. “I got to the point where in a lot of courses, I didn’t have to sit at the front of the class (despite his disability), because I learned how to listen and take effective notes,” he says.

Outside of the classroom, Jake was integral in restarting a disabled students group at the university that had been operating in his first year, but became dormant the following year. In his third year, Jake took it upon himself to obtain funding and to draw up a constitution for a new disabled students’ organization. He says being part of such a group allows students to meet with peers facing similar challenges, and to have an outlet that can help them advocate for their needs.

“It showed me who to go to for things I needed,” Jake remembers. “It also taught me how to recognize skills in people. I could ask certain people to take on tasks based on what skills they were good at.”

Jake advises students with disabilities who are considering post-secondary education to research as many schools as possible, and familiarize themselves with the campus and people on it before deciding to attend. Above all, though, he says to just go for it.

"Fears about getting accommodations, or having proper finances, those aren't issues," says Jake. "There are scholarships, and resources to deal with things that come up. You'll never regret going to post-secondary school, but you will regret not going."

Mary Anne Duchesne

Mary Anne Duchesne is a visually impaired mature student in the Northwest Territories. She is also the Territories Representative on the NEADS Board of Directors and the Secretary/Treasurer of the Association. Being a student with disabilities in the Northwest Territories, where services the rest of the country can take advantage of often don't reach until much later, has posed many problems. But she says her determination has allowed her to combat most of these challenges.

Mary Anne is two courses away from obtaining a degree in management studies from Aurora College. Prior to starting her degree in 1997, she was in the workforce for several years. Having attended high school earlier than many other current post-secondary students would have, and having been a person with disabilities in the workforce, Mary Anne has seen the changes in services and treatment of people with disabilities in the Northwest Territories.

"When I was in high school there were very few accommodations available," she says. "It was either sink or swim, and it was the same in many of my jobs. It was only 1995, when I was working for the Worker's Compensation Board, when I first got any accommodations." Mary Anne says she wasn't even aware until that point that she was entitled to any sort of accommodations as a person with a disability.

She says that even though Aurora College is a small campus, she has been able to get accommodations most of the times she has needed them. She has been able to write many exams in 14-point font size, which is easier for her to read, and later discovered she could do exams on a computer. "My handwriting looks like chicken scratch, so that was wonderful," Mary Anne says. In addition, many instructors

have been happy to give her copies of class lecture notes so she can re-read things she has missed. That's not to say it's been all smooth sailing in dealing with instructors. Mary Anne says the fact that the Aurora College program is offered in conjunction with the much larger Athabasca University has helped some, because the Athabasca administrators have been able to step in for her in certain problematic cases. But she says having the confidence to approach instructors herself has been a key to getting results.

Another challenge for Mary Anne was funding – both obtaining it, and learning how to spend it wisely. She says she has had to be very careful with budgeting. “I found early on (while on student loans). I had just enough money from September to Christmas. Then they gave a second installment in January, and that was enough until the end of the school year,” she says. “I guess it was not having the holidays in there.”

In addition to paying for tuition, she tells of a struggle to find funding for reading glasses she needed for her studies. She had to approach the Northwest Territories' government's health and social services department to obtain the \$1,000 needed to pay for the glasses. “If not, you had to go through the process of talking to your MLA.” After a three to five month wait, she got the glasses. But she had to go through another long process after she broke that pair.

Mary Anne advises students who want to succeed at post-secondary school to “treat it like a job.” Taking night classes gave her the day to prepare. She says each class required between 3 to 5 hours of readings per week, and she'd do those the day of her class so the material was fresh. She completed her assignments on the weekends. In addition, Mary Anne says she organized study groups for several classes. These allowed her to study with a group for exams, as well as to compare answers on assignments with her peers, so that errors could be corrected before the work was submitted.

“The number one thing is to be goal-oriented,” Mary Anne says of how to succeed at college or university. “If you set something as a goal, follow through on it for yourself. You have to make sure you're doing this for yourself, and not for someone else.”