

College is where life can begin again

by Karin Melberg Schwier

Cassie Chaba had been included in regular education all through her school years in Edmonton. During school, she spent time with friends, some of whom she's known her whole life who "treated me like anybody else. We talked about boys, went to parties, and hung out on the weekends. The usual!" Cassie says using her foot-controlled Echo voice synthesizer.

Cassie and her family assumed her inclusion with friends would be a reflection of her adult life. But after the hubbub of high school graduation, complete with friends, a rented limo and all-night dancing, a chilling reality settled in. Options for a job or further education were at best limited, at worst non-existent. When September rolled around and Cassie still had no prospects, she got scared "because I didn't have anywhere else to go. It makes me sad to think about it. I literally did nothing but sit on my couch," she says. "I started to explore other options and all I could find was a day program and I still desperately wanted to be a university student. It was a very bad year. It was lonely and depressing."



College confidential: Before being supported to attend post-secondary school, "I was worried about my future." Between classes at Grant MacEwan University in Edmonton, Cassie Chaba, centre, says, "My life has changed in ways I would never think were possible."

(Photo by Karin Melberg Schwier)

It was a dream she held on to for a year while she waited, sitting at home, watching TV and reading, checked on by a neighbour to make sure she was safe. Sometimes she stayed with her grandmother. "Although I love spending time with my grandma," she adds, "I was worried about my future." As the months passed, worry turned to despair.

"I felt terrible. I could not believe that I had been so easily included my entire life, and now I was about to face a life where I was excluded and sitting on the sidelines. I cried a lot," Cassie remembers.

Cassie's mom, Dianne, kept searching and one day found AACL on the Internet. "When I connected with AACL, it was fantastic. There was no second question. They wanted to meet her. They kept saying she could go to college and it got to the point where my husband and I didn't believe them. We'd go, 'Really? Like are you serious?' It was almost surreal."

"My mom did not believe them at first when they said I would be a university student," Cassie says. "I had almost given up, but I felt hopeful, but still skeptical." After talking with AACL's Charmaine McIntyre, Cassie saw her life take a huge turn. "Because I was finally able to see a future ahead of me," she recalls. "It is hard to describe the immense relief I felt."

Norquest College is one of AACL's many inclusive post-secondary initiatives and this is where Cassie began her post-secondary education. There are 18 post-secondary institutions in Alberta that include students with developmental disabilities. "AACL saw the value I bring to the world," Cassie insists, "and knew it was possible for me to be included in post-secondary education on the path to a career."

After completing the two years of the therapeutic recreation program at Norquest and convocating with her peers, Cassie decided she'd need a broader understanding of office procedures to get a good job. In 2010, she entered the Administrative Assistant program at Grant MacEwan University. How's it going? "I love it!" Cassie's smile spreads across her face. "My life has changed in ways I would never think were possible. Every day I'm exposed to new ideas, people and ways of thinking. I have made close friends and I contribute to my classes in valuable and meaningful ways."

Nathan Ip is the coordinator of Campus Connections, which facilitates the inclusion of students with developmental disabilities at MacEwan, another of AACL's inclusive post-secondary initiatives. Cassie is, he says, "a ray of sunshine. You can feel her energy. She's one of the most optimistic people I've ever met in my life. She loves admin assistant work, and that's where her heart is now. She loves working with people and likes the practical skills."

"It is really about the authentic and robust university student experience," he says. "When you look at the kind of school life that a lot of successful university students have, there are those who are very active and involved. They know where they're going. They have internships over the summer. They're on student council. Many will go on to become leaders in their community. We're really interested in supporting that kind of university experience for students with developmental disabilities. Students we support can become leaders in their community. They can dream big and it is possible to achieve their dreams."

Of course, there are university students who simply "go to class and then go play video games," he laughs, "but we're about supporting a much more active and involved experience."

At MacEwan, Campus Connections Educational Assistant Hilary Kirkpatrick provides support to Cassie. "She helps me outside class and with homework," Cassie says. Hilary works with Cassie and her instructors on course modifications if they are required. Eileen Matthews, Office Assistant Program Chair is Cassie's favourite teacher. "She is kind, understanding, and I know she wants all of her



At Cassie's graduation from Norquest, "Grandma was thrilled for me. She still is thrilled for me."

students to succeed. She is an excellent instructor."

"I think the key to post-secondary education, for any of us, is that we go through a 'coming of age' process," says Nathan. "Students we support go through that as well to better understand themselves, realize what might be possible and see a broadened series of possibilities."

AACL held a lunch-and-learn session at Stantec, an international engineering firm headquartered in Edmonton, attended by about 75 employees. Cassie was one of the presenters and shared her story, including her desire to work in office administration. Rick Prentice from the Edmonton Rotary Club and Vice-President, Export Sales and Marketing, with the support of Dave Kinders, Managing Senior Principal, Urban Land, and Keith Shillington, Vice-President and Regional Leader, Alberta, Edmonton

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Capital Region, were keen to see individuals with developmental disabilities having the opportunity to work at Stantec.

Stantec was impressed with Cassie and this past summer offered her an office assistant internship, in which Cassie reveled. "This summer my dreams came true of securing employment as an administrative assistant at Stantec...My job is mainly analyzing outdated documents and fixing or updating templates," she explains. "In the future, I'll be creating project profiles; these are pictures that depict in a nutshell the project that took place."

She worked close to full-time and when her studies resumed this fall Stantec offered her part-time employment which Cassie gladly accepted. Now, like most students, she is working to support her education while going to school.

Hilary accompanied Cassie in the beginning, but her support tapered off as Cassie became part of the Stantec staff. Because Cassie requires her Echo to communicate, "I had to help people feel comfortable and learn how to talk with me." Though she felt comfortable from the outset, Cassie really felt accepted "when my co-worker Caroline and I realized that we have a similar sense of humour and started spending time together outside of work," Cassie says. "Caroline has become a great friend of mine."

"I offered some minor support when she started, but it was all Cassie," says Hilary, who feels that inclusion in college and in the workplace has "amazing benefits" for classmates and co-workers. "How lucky for students taking those inclusive classes with a student who has a disability! Cassie tends to blow people out of the water. They'll remember her."

"David Kinders is fantastic. He is a great motivator and an excellent boss," says Cassie. "Stantec treats me with immense amounts of respect and I'm absolutely included and accepted as a contributing member of the team." Stantec has organized Cassie's office to maximize her interactions with co-workers and facilitate her work.

Stantec has now hired five individuals with developmental disabilities through AACL's Partnership with Rotary. Cassie has been formally offered a full-time job when she completes her studies this spring. "She gets very well paid and her office is way better than ours!" Nathan says as Cassie laughs.



Classmates and fellow Norquest graduates Gina Echevarria and Cassie Chaba. "I wanted to continue my education just like my friends. I didn't want to be told I had no options."

"There's a cappuccino machine."

Jokes subside and talk turns serious. Cassie is adamant in her advice to other people with disabilities who may feel isolated and lost after high school. "There is support out there," she insists. "It's possible."

Her brilliant smile evaporates when she thinks about what her life might have been like without college. As Cassie enters her answer into her Echo, Hilary elaborates. "Cassie and I have had long talks about that," says Hilary. "I think she was petrified about the trajectory of her life. The relief was immeasurable when she realized 'I not only can have the life I dreamed of, but also the life I expected to have.' To me, everyone deserves a life that's valued," Hilary adds.

About that life that might have been? Cassie replies, "Not good. I would be so bored. I didn't want to be in a workshop; I wanted to go to continue my education just like my friends. I wanted to pursue my passions like any other 18-year-old. I wanted to create a life for myself, not be told that I had no options."

When she knew it could be different, was she scared, excited, worried? Coming to university was "all the above," Cassie's smile returns full force. "Scary and exciting and 'what am I doing here?' I had almost lost hope, but I had faith."

Her life now? "Awesome!" ▣