

20 - AUGUST 2019

# RADICAL ROADS

LIFE IN DISABILITY STUDIES

Lost Leaders

Twenty Years On

Communicating Access,  
Accessing Communication

Alumni Reflection

## Exploring the lives of the Ryerson Alumni of Disability Studies

RADS Roads is written by students and alumni for students, alumni and the DST community.

All DST students and alumni are encouraged to contribute pieces of writing and resources. Together we make this newsletter. Submissions for the newsletter are welcome at any time.

Please send content to Kim Collins at:  
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AUGUST 2019

Kim Collins is the editor of RADS Roads



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Associate Professor, School of  
Disability Studies  
Kathryn Church, PhD

Last week, my office colleagues organized a surprise party to mark the end of my second and final term as director of Disability Studies. My gratitude to everyone for finessing this event in the midst of so much other organizing in the School just now. Thank you to everyone who attended (or sent messages) on the eve of the Canada Day long weekend. It was a fabulous mix of faculty, course instructors, students and alumni, colleagues from other programs and universities, and the community. Thank you to Page One Café in the Merchandise Building – my ever-so-convenient home -- for being accessible and flexible with us taking over the space. A particular word of thanks to people who told me ahead of time that they were unable to attend. (I was surprised every time!) You saved me from being short of words for the occasion! What follows are some of them.

Back in the mid-1980's, then Member of Provincial Parliament David Reville made a provocative speech to the annual conference of the Canadian Mental Health Association. About to become the first “consumer/survivor” (Mad) representative on the national board, he challenged the organization to “Get urgent! Get political! Get on the agenda!” The organizational response was negligible. But I got the message: a fledgling community organizer looking to break with my early psychology training; to speak, think and act more sociologically and radically on issues of mental health. Four decades later, the narrative arc of that speech continues to weave its way through my practice in Disability Studies and Mad Studies. Without a doubt, it framed my uptake of the director role, and the contributions I have tried to make over the past eight years.

I am fiercely proud of Disability Studies at Ryerson – of the curricular and pedagogical, research, creative and service contributions that our unique community of practice make to the Faculty of Community Services, to Ryerson University, to Toronto's downtown core, and, through our dispersed student body, to many other locations in Ontario. We have become a lead program in Canada, and a touchstone for scholars and activists internationally. It has been a privilege to represent this program with the Dean's Office (two Deans, in fact), “sister” programs in FCS,

other faculties and levels of university administration. As you might expect, routinely, the process was one of trying to close the gap between what people imagine about “disability” or Disability Studies and our actual concerns, political orientation, and organizational form. Inevitably, it was a job of speaking-up, contesting dominant assumptions, speaking-for alternatives, and speaking-with allies in critical analysis and action.

For me -- not always but often -- it was a hard job. But then, it is a truism at Ryerson that being a director is one of the most difficult jobs a faculty member can take on. It combines high expectations, responsibilities and accountabilities, shrinking resources and little authority to act. The leadership workshops and conferences on offer take a skills-acquisition approach. They wind us up to becoming competent in the technologized managerialism that is transforming the university. They barely scratch the surface of our real dilemmas: in my case, to be upheld in engaging the contradictions of my privilege as white, straight, and non-disabled together with the gender, geographic and social class relations that shaped my personal history.

Yet, even this struggle has been to my advantage. I am profoundly grateful for a sustained opportunity to expand my understanding of how the university works (or does not), and to exercise my capacity to intervene through speaking (out), documenting and other actions. One of my objectives as director was to get approval for the delivery of our existing curriculum on a full-time basis. Taking this step would ease, if not eliminate, many of the difficulties that our students face – and the radiating inequities we all experience across a range of necessary activities. This has not been successful -- yet.

There are numerous encouraging disability “hotspots” at Ryerson but significant erasures, as well, ways in which our program as a lead equity formation is made invisible, minimized or taken up in ways that undermine our core project and the many different people who are creating it. But I have received enormous encouragement, as well, privately and collegially, to recover, regroup and head back into the fray.

As we enter our 20th anniversary celebration, Disability Studies is popping with a vitality that is not limited to new spaces and fresh paint! Summer Institute courses went well with instructors Fiona Cheuk (DST 501), Danielle Landry (DST 613) and Jessica Moore (DST 525). After months of preparing, we hosted two major events: the annual Activist Lecture titled Organizing in Terrible Times delivered by Lydia XZ Brown – an important message of “reworking and resisting”; and the Student Awards Ceremony – our grandest ever. It featured formal announcement of the Tanis Doe Postdoctoral Fellowship in Gender, Disability and Social Justice, a two-year award intended for a disabled scholar, funded through the generous support of the P&L Odette Foundation (thank you Fran and Lou) with yearly contributions from Ryerson’s Office of Research and Innovation (thank you Dr. Steven Liss).

In a mature program of 12 regular awards, this year Disability Studies is giving out \$45,647 to 35 students. In addition, we have directed \$500 each to 9 students to assist with course fees in the coming term. Not part of the official Awards Program, these funds are a one-time contribution that recognizes the negative impact of government cuts to jobs and services on our student body. In total, we are distributing \$50,147 in awards.

I send very best wishes and full support to Dr. Esther Ignagni who started a 3-year term as director on July 1. Best wishes as well to Dr. Jenna Reid who will fill the Limited Term Faculty replacement position approved for my sabbatical year beginning August 1. For myself, I look forward to tapping the “slow scholarship” that has been bubbling beneath the director veneer. My most pressing desire is to write.

Peace out.

# Kathryn

The School of Disability Studies has experienced three significant losses over the early summer: alumnus Kevin Jackson, friend, journalist and disability activist Ing Wong Ward, and donor and friend, Beth Foulkes. All three had a powerful impact on the School and we will feel their loss keenly.



## Beth Foulkes

Beth and Amber Foulkes established the Beth Foulkes Community Living Award recognizing students committed to social inclusion.

A regular attendee at our Awards Ceremony, Beth passed away Monday, May 6, 2019. She leaves her family, her devoted mother Amber, sisters Rachel and Hillary, and brother Michael.

Born with Down Syndrome in 1966, she encountered disabling challenges which are still faced by many today. With the indefatigable support of her mother, she successfully broke traditional barriers

surrounding institutional care and education when most did not. She travelled the world with her parents, and in my memory, she only missed an awards ceremony when she was on one of her trips.

Amber Foulkes remembered Beth as she presented the award to this year's recipients, Tiffany-Anne Stokes and Emma Mitchell. Here is some of that text:

"We hope that this award in Beth's name is both an encouragement to continue your contribution and some small financial relief in your doing. As you can imagine, it's a heavy heart to be here without Beth. She is remembered lovingly. We are just missing her – the youngest one in our family. As most of you know, being born in 1966 with any disability or difference created momentous challenges. We were told she'll never walk, she'll never do anything, forget you ever had her. Through many surgeries, significant advocacy efforts including some of the people who started this program here at Ryerson and many at the community at large, Beth was able to have a desirable life and be well travelled. We miss Beth terribly. She was both daughter and companion. She was a sister, a great auntie, and a caring friend to so many. Her smile was infectious and her love of life inspiring. We do take comfort knowing her influence will help support awareness at Ryerson's school of disability studies for the next 20 years and beyond. As she would have said, thank you for all you do. You are superb."

## Ing Wong Ward

Ing Wong Ward was initially introduced to the School by professor emeritus Catherine Frazee. At the time, she worked as a journalist and producer at the CBC. Her disability politic was developing, and she taught students about media representation of disability and difference. Over the years her analysis became more complicated.



More recently, Ing embodied fascinating disability paradoxes. She left journalism in order to assume the position of Associate Director at the Centre for Independent Living Toronto. In many ways this was consistent with Ing's commitment to the independent living movement promoted in her early lectures to students in our School and to broader publics. She prided herself in picking up her daughter from school, taking her to the playground, traveling on public transit and doing the groceries on her own. This celebration of independence may speak in part to the fragile hold disabled people have on privacy and autonomy and its critical distinctions from isolation which threaten so many of us.

Her embrace was focusing disability justice. Her lively social media conversation with US activist Alice Wong signaled a complex intersectional analysis that proceeds from holistic and multi-faceted disability experiences, interdependency, and the need for "collective access and collective liberation" in world-building (Mingus, 2011).

No where was this more evident than in her decision to enter palliative care in the advent of her diagnosis of inoperable colon cancer. In the wake of the Medical Assistance in Dying Legislation in Canada in 2016, Ing took a position that railed against the tide of public opinion. She rejected the idea that there was only one way to die with dignity (Frazee, 2019). Students in the more recent DST 501 classes, a foundation disability studies course, have read and listened to her commentaries in which she critically interrogated the systemic issues related to living and dying with dignity, about access to palliative and community care and our cultural engagements with death.

We can follow her husband Tim's encouragement to engage with her ideas through her columns, facebook commentary and her twitter feed. However, disability advocacy in Canada is a little less vibrant with her passing.

Please check out the following links for writing by Ing Wong Ward.

['A compromised life is worth living': Why Ing Wong-Ward won't choose medically assisted death](#)

## Kevin Jackson



In the last days of the Summer Institute, we learned with acute shock and sadness, that our friend and alumnus Kevin Jackson passed away.

Kevin graduated from Disability Studies in 2014, then went on to pursue his MA and PhD in Critical Disability Studies at York University. An organizer of the Toronto Disability Pride March, a socialist and an integral leader in the mad community, Kevin was dearly loved by many within and beyond the School. In a small academic unit like the School of Disability Studies, everyone tends to know each other. Kevin distinguished himself as an excellent student and as a gentle and generous guide to his classmates. Students from more recent years will know him as a guest speaker in one of our classes, a guest blogger or as a feature of one of the Ordinary Extraordinary Activism films.

We are thinking of his many friends, his mentors, David Reville and Kathryn Church, his family and his fiancée and comrade, Melissa Graham.

Perhaps Kevin's impact is best captured by a note from a former classmate shortly after news of his passing:



"I'm really shocked and saddened by this news. Before I had to take a hiatus from the program, we were in school alongside each other with Kevin a little ahead of me in courses, but never acting as if he was ahead of me in courses. I learned a lot from him, he helped me feel comfortable in my madness and actually helped me feel proud of it. That period of time was a huge identity shift for me and I felt really lucky to know him and Nicole Meehan at the time. He also helped me understand that I didn't need to be working in order to have a strong personal identity and helped me break down capitalist notions of what made me worthy as a mad/disabled person. He is going to be greatly missed by many, but the impact he had on his community will remain intact."

A celebration of life for Kevin will be held in conjunction with the Toronto Disability Pride March this fall. Please watch the School Facebook page and dspall for more information.

Also, please check out the film produced by the Student Alumni Advisory Committee with funding from the Learning and Teaching Office's Learning and Teaching Enhancement Fund about Kevin Jackson.

[Ordinary Extraordinary Activism - Kevin Jackson](#)

Written by Esther Ignagni



Written by Melanie Panitch

Twenty years on...

In the hot summer of 1999, 25 students took a chance and registered for a new program, Disability Studies at Ryerson. It was August, and they were about to be the first cohort to experience DST 501, that game-changing, rethinking, head-spinning course that serves as a rite of passage into the further depths of the program. Catherine Frazee was scheduled to teach that summer, but driving from Banff encountered car trouble, arriving just in the nick of time. It was the also the first time disability culture was introduced into the curriculum. What began experimentally with two dancers, a wheelchair, a canoe and a boom box, turned into a decade of dramatic evenings of disability-inspired performances called Art with Attitude. The first award ceremony in 2000 was made possible by a generous gift from Mrs Marion Chant, who knew first-hand the significance of giving students, as she would say, "a leg up". These were but a few examples of the many 'firsts' I was honoured to play a part in creating, but the reason I recall these few examples is to illuminate the many ways these foundational moments have been deepened and strengthened over the years. DST 501 now embraces greater intersectionality as the field of disability studies has matured; disability arts and culture is a critically important research and teaching cornerstone in the school; and the awards ceremony has emerged as a most elegant showcase of donors and students extending over a whole afternoon.

I am so very proud and grateful for having been able to play a leadership role in the founding years of the school. It was a creative time for me personally as I was also finishing a doctorate. That means that by day I was making decisions, teaching and organizing courses and recruiting instructors, but by night, I was in the student role, worrying like every other student what my thesis supervisor might be thinking about the last piece of writing I submitted.

A highlight of course was the major corporate gift by RBC in 2001 which lasted a decade and helped us put ourselves on the map. The “Out from Under: Disability, History and Things to Remember” curated by Kathryn Church, Catherine Frazee and myself, now in the permanent collection at the Canadian Museum of Human Rights is the momentous legacy of that era.

Soon after we launched the School, CBC expressed interest in this first-ever disability studies program in Canada. In an interview with faculty and students, Michael Enright asked, “what do you hope students will take from this program?” We answered: “capacity and courage”; the capacity to reflect critically on the many ways disabled people get a raw deal, and the courage to resist traditional practice and policy and to advocate for change.

This would be as true now as it was then, only now the roots have deepened, broadened and taken firmer hold. Congratulations DST on 20 extraordinary years.

Written by Eliza Chandler

It is remarkable to think of the impact the School of Disability Studies at Ryerson has had on the field of disability and mad studies, activism, and arts and culture over the past twenty years. One of the things I continue to appreciate about the School is the ways that we bring disability studies into the university while at the same time work to make the university and other traditional spaces of knowledge production (e.g. conferences and research projects) more inclusive and create space for students, scholars, and activists. As a disabled disability studies scholar with strong and ongoing connections to disability community-based activism, this is the work that I want to do. And, because of the legacy of the School doing community-based work in the university, this is the work I am supported to do. I'll talk about what I mean by this more specifically with an example.

This past January, the School of Disability Studies co-hosted the [Crippling the Arts symposium](#) at the Harbourfront Centre in Toronto with partners [Tangled Art + Disability](#), [Creative Users Projects](#), the [British Council](#), and the [Harbourfront Centre](#). This symposium brought together artists and academics from across Canada to discuss ideas pertinent to the development of disability, mad, and Deaf arts. Henceforth I will refer to Deaf, mad, and disability arts by the umbrella term 'disability arts.' Together, we talked about issues such as [Relaxed Performance](#) and the way it is changing the way we experience theatre, leadership in disability arts, the ways disability arts are represented in journalism, intersections of race, disability, Indigeneity, ableism, and settler colonialism, and how disability arts are effected by [austerity measures, particularly the restructuring of the Ontario Disability Support Program](#).



Michelle Peek Photography courtesy of Bodies in Translation: Activist Art, Technology & Access to Life, Re•Vision: The Centre for Art & Social Justice at the University of Guelph.

Unsurprisingly, a major part of our planning for this event consisted of planning for accessibility. Our access plan – a plan of all of the access components at this event – was built upon past collective learnings about how to make events accessible together with a consultation process wherein we asked participants to identify any access needs that we had not yet considered. This approach is more fully considered and explained in this article: [Ignagni E, Chandler E, Collins K, Darby A, & Liddiard K. \(2019\). Designing Access Together. Canadian Journal of Disability Studies](#). We framed access as an intersectional project in service of a diverse disability community (e.g. for washrooms to be accessible, they also must be all-gender). Communicating our access plan to everyone attending the event through the creation of an [access guide](#) was an important part of this event's accessibility. Access guides are documents given out to participants before an event which communicates essential details of the event so that participants know what to expect and how to plan and prepare accordingly. These details typically include the access features available (audio describers, quiet rooms, etc.), the schedule of the event, details of who will be speaking at the event, a description of the venue (usually in words and photographs), and instructions for how to get to the venue via accessible routes. The guide may also include sensorial information, such as any strong smells or loud sounds you might encounter.

Access guides are created because communicating access plans are an essential part of enacting access. They signal to people that their presence at an event has been anticipated and desired, particularly communities of people who may be systemically excluded from such events, we must communicate how we have planned for their arrival.

Because so many cultural events are inaccessible, and require disabled people to put in advanced requests for accessibility which may or may not be fulfilled at best, we cannot assume that our presence as disabled people will be anticipated and accounted for. This is why communicating an event's access plan through a pre-distributed access guide is key to enacting its accessibility.

The function of an access guide is to introduce participants to what they can expect from an event in order to remove the guess work from preparing for an event that many disabled people are often required to do. For example, to alleviate the dis-ease that comes with not being sure if a venue will have an all-gender accessible washroom or if the schedule will be relaxed and/or have adequate breaks (and plan for the worst), we wanted to provide this information in advance. As we were thinking about the information that would be helpful to include in the access guide in order to prepare participants for Crippling the Arts, we recalled some feedback given to us by artists at [Sol Express](#) at the last [Crippling the Arts symposium](#). These artists told us that the event would have been more accessible to them had they had access to a list of words (jargon, like academic terms and phrases) that might be used so that they could have familiarized themselves with any unknown language before coming to the event. Sol Express was asking us for better advanced communication in order to prepare participants for what they could expect at the event, and therefore it made sense that we engage with this feedback as we were creating the access plan. This access request opened up necessary conversations about the knowledge base, terminology, vocabulary, and experiences we assume, or even expect, of our participants, as well as how these assumptions/expectations are inclusive to some and exclusive to others.

And so, as a way of extending our thinking about how to create and communicate an access plan that was effective as well as invitational, we decided to elaborate our access guide to introduce practices and protocols which might be helpful to understand when orienting to the symposium. This included things like explaining what land acknowledges are and why we deliver them and outlining ways that we all can participate in making the space more inclusive (e.g. using people's correct pronouns and talking into the microphone).

The access guide also included, in direct response to Sol Express's request, a glossary of terms written in plain language, including terms relevant to the symposium such as ableism, aesthetics, BIPOC, Elder, panel/panelists, and pronouns.

The considerations Sol Express introduced us to motivated us to think carefully about the knowledge base we expect of symposium participants as well as how we know what we (think we) know. I (think I) know what decolonization is, but being tasked with defining this term simply and briefly while capturing its necessary complexities caused me to think about decolonization differently and more carefully than I had ever done before. This was a very productive experience for developing my own understanding of these terms, initiated by the call to improve access.

Through this process, we began to think about how essential communication is to access. Communication is not only needed to share and enact an effective access plan; accessible communication becomes a key part of that plan.

Thinking about communication as an essential component to access caused us to also think about how we might communicate in a more accessible way. We decided to produce the access guide in an Easy Read format, which is a method of translating information using plain language, pictorial communication exchange symbols ([PECS](#)), and images. I first came across plain language and PECS while working on [Making Space for Intimate Citizenship](#), a research project, led by Esther Ignagni and Ann Fudge-Schormans. This research project had a [dictionary of relevant terms](#) written in plain language created by Kim Collins. To develop this Easy Read Access Guide, we (DST, Creative Users Projects, the British Council) worked with designer Koby Barhad (Assistant Professor at OCADU and designer at [Radical Norms](#)) to develop our PECS (figures 3 and 4) and [Bodies in Translation's](#) Knowledge Mobilization Coordinator Kayla Besse and Project Manager Tracy Tidgwell to develop the glossary of terms (figure 5). We also consulted in feedback sessions with a group of artists from Sol Express as we developed the PECS for the access guide.

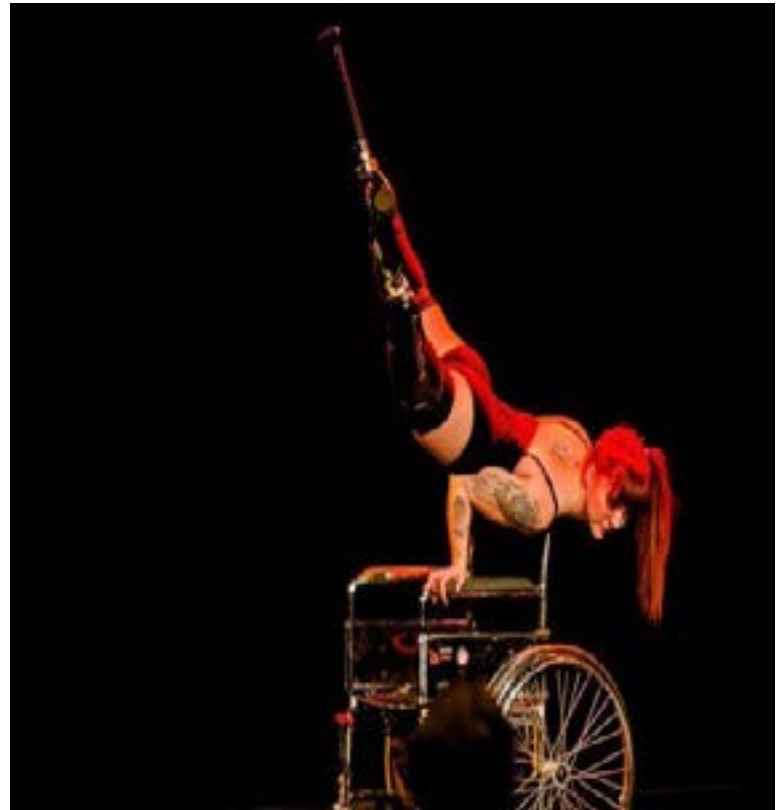
As it turned out, the access guide in its finished form read like a more thorough version of the program; it contained all of the information in the program but with more details on what one could expect at the symposium. We sent this guide out to various groups of artists who we knew were coming to the symposium, such as [BEING Studio](#) (Ottawa), [DramaWay](#) (Toronto), [Joe, Jack, et John](#) (Montreal), and Sol Express (Toronto), and we received many reports from people who used this guide before, during, or after this symposium.

Personally, I think being a part of the creation of this access guide transformed the way I approach access. I make a practice of approaching accessibility as an opportunity to include people who are typically and systemically excluded through multiple and intersecting barriers. More recently I have begun to understand how important it is to communicate an access plan in order for it to be effective. Added to this, working with Sol Express and the other partners on the development of the Crippling the Arts access guide, has taught me that we must approach the way we communicate our access plan, as well as the orienting information included within it, as an opportunity to invite in people who may be excluded. This idea was one of my biggest learnings about accessibility this year.

All of this comes back to the benefits that working with the School of Disability Studies at Ryerson affords its students, alumni, faculty, and friends. We work in a space and with colleagues who value the necessary work of re-thinking disability and coming up with innovative, creative, and even radical ways of including people typically excluded from the university and other spaces of knowledge production, people who should be at the centre of this important work.

For another great example of an access guide that makes spaces of academia more inclusive by communicating what we might expect when attending an academic conference, check out the Canadian Disability Studies Association's [Survival Guide](#) for their upcoming conference developed by York Critical Disability Studies Masters student, Caroline Kovesi.

The development of this access guide was funded in part by an FCS, Ryerson Project Grant.



Michelle Peek Photography courtesy of Bodies in Translation: Activist Art, Technology & Access to Life, Re•Vision: The Centre for Art & Social Justice at the University of Guelph.



I am humbled and honored to be celebrating the 20th Anniversary of the Disability Studies Program. Time has flown by so quickly.

My journey began at Centennial College in the Developmental Services Program. To give you a bit of background, I grew up with a sibling with hearing challenges and had always had this sense of social and political inequalities when it came to her.

During this program I met Donald Easson, one of the best teachers I have ever met, who suggested, now 20 years ago, that a program called Disability Studies would be starting at Ryerson University. I can remember the feeling in the room to think that we would be a part of something bigger and that other people have recognized the importance of a population that has been marginalized for a very long time.

I finally enrolled in The Disability Studies program 19 years ago, in the fall of 2000. I realized very quickly that it was not a program about supporting disabled people. It was and remains a program about people, whose lives have been shaped by social and political injustices, and despite these barriers they have made great strides. The courses focus on social justice, identity and inequities within our system. We are taught about history, arts, culture and Disability Justice, where we look forward and shift from an equality-based model to a model that embraces differences.

I engaged in courses with passionate professors like Catherine Frazee, Melanie Panitch, Charles Silverman, Cameron Crawford, who really make you reflect on how policies and laws are disabling itself on the experiences of people. They are true activists and transparently influence their learners into one day becoming activists themselves.

A couple years into the program as the courses became more and more engaging, I realized that I was juggling school, a child, live in in-laws and a job. I was struggling, and I knew that I needed to take a break from school because I could not give my studies the attention that it needed. Years went by and I continued supporting students and struggled with thoughts of not being accepted into the program after many years had passed. I would not have started again if it was not for my husband with his encouraging words and support.

I applied again and did not think that I would be accepted let alone carry over the courses that I had taken 13 years ago. Although I was very nervous about getting back into the work, I started my unfinished journey again with the course Mad People's History, where David Reville hooked me back into the world of triumphant individuals who fought against historical, political and societal perceptions and there was no going back. Courses like Disability and the Good Human Life allowed



me to see a different perspective on how lives are shaped by our ideals and how we are influenced politically. And *Crippling the Arts* allowed me to see the depth of the arts and using this for social and political action. The courses led me to reflect on how not only mindsets needed to be changed, but it allowed me to reflect on my own views and how I could take responsibility for my own perceptions. I loved this part of the program where the knowledge you receive opens you up to the possibility that you can be part of this transformation.

Paris, our program coordinator, was another source of support for me even though she may not be aware of it. I would send Paris countless emails of inquiry and she always responded back by guiding me with her suggestions on courses and helping me with the student advisement report which was very confusing for me. I would make her check over and over if I had the right requirements to graduate. Well Paris, I am finally done!

I have purposely reflected not only on the generous and malleable program but on the people that I have had the pleasure of meeting. It is the professors and staff who themselves believe in Disability Justice and that comes through in their teachings. The students share their involvement and practices, and this allow us all to have deep and meaningful dialogue of access, identity, and to really examine the policies that shape people's perceptions and experiences within our system.

What brought everything together for me was the final course, DST 99 Research methods, the thesis process. This process was both an awakening and transforming experience for me. I was pleased that it was left to the end of my journey because it demonstrates our growth as leaders and as activists.

I want to send out a heartfelt thank you to Esther and Eliza for being so supportive during this process. I would also like to give a huge thank you to Kathryn Church for leading us all towards inquiry and change. Because without this program we would not be able to even conceive the possibility of awareness.

So now I ask myself with all that I have learned what is next on the horizon...

I will be starting teacher's college this August to further practices that I have learned — which is that the norms of society are not what they are, but will be what we make it. We need to make them through a disability justice lens, which is to change the social construct that exists and to make it into something that we can rely on. In the words of Mia Mingus, in *Crippling the Arts*, "We don't simply want to join the ranks of the privileged; we want to dismantle those ranks and systems that maintain them."

I would like to end in saying thank you for listening and I hope that if you are seeking a program with caring and compassionate professors and staff who will guide you and help you in becoming a better version of yourself, you are in the right place!

# What are students and alumni up to?

## Alumni Reflection by Sandra Phillips

Such a momentous occasion deserves a celebration and messages of gratitude. We have been blessed with the teachings and fellowship of so many amazing professors and equally insightful peers.

It is hard to believe that 20 years have gone by since I joined the DST family.

It was the summer of 1999 when I joined twenty or so other eager students on this adventure. The first Disabilities Studies program in Canada and it was happening at Ryerson. In that first cohort the diversity in the program was mostly a result of age, I watch with inspiration as there has emerged a much richer diversity over the years. I am so proud to be a part of a program that also embraces the diversity of learning; please look for Paul Benson's submission in the latest newsletter.

Initially there was a majority of students who had been working in disability related pursuits for a number of years and we were excited to have the opportunity to study with leaders in the field. There were a large number of students coming from the education system as E.A.'s wanting to become teachers, and have an impact and influence on the system from an activist perspective. For myself, I was looking to be surrounded by like-minded people, gain

knowledge and grow, but also to reignite the passion that I knew was within. The program did that and so much more.

I not only met and truly engaged with some very influential people, I was able to hone my skills as an activist and develop some relationships that have lasted the 20 years. Spending time with the likes of Catherine Frazee, Malcolm Jefferies, Kathryn Church and Melanie Panitch; discussing current issues with classmates like Helen Henderson influenced my critical insights, reflective questions and the way I conducted the classes I taught.

The bonding that occurred over summer sessions, online classes and intensive courses created relationships that were unique to any University program. Having immensely dedicated professors that were on the journey with students resulted in some amazing creations like the Out From Under exhibit. That was a surreal experience that I'm sure not many students get; going from the Abilities Arts Festival in 07 to Royal Ontario Museum in 08 and then to a Para Olympic exhibit in Vancouver in 2010. The culmination of that led to having part of the Exhibit as an installation at the Canadian Museum of Human Rights in 2014. Now that's an accomplishment!

It was not only the classroom educational opportunities but the community experiences we engaged in not to mention constantly being present as history was being made. things that

emerged like the AODA; these were beyond everyday experiences.

The creation of Art with Attitude, a celebration of disability art, was something that drew me back to the University for several years after graduation; words cannot express how motivating, inspiring and connecting those performances were to someone who lives and works in a rural area where that caliber of talent is a rare occurrence.

The thought provoking and stimulating presentations at DST99 were a highlight each year for me.



Looking at the multitude of venues this degree had taken people is nothing short of astounding. Co-editing the initial few years of RADS Roads, now Radical Roads, was a pleasure; watching the Alumni grow and seeing the great accomplishments of newer students.

The Disability Studies program as a whole continues to grow develop and become the exemplary program it is. The recognition and support is witnessed through the many awards that are given each year to deserving student.

As I come nearer to the end of my professional career in a non profit organization supporting persons with

disabilities, I cannot begin to express what an important part of my career this program has been; shaping me and being the catalyst to my influence and impact on my community. This program was and is so much more than an educational experience, it really is a transformative process of reflection, debate and discovery. I look forward to engaging at various levels of community development in my retirement with this lens.

I am so proud of all the accomplishments of the program; all the challenges that have been met and all the amazing activists that have been launched into so many different realms of our society to truly make a difference.

Happy 20th anniversary!

# Disability Studies: An Alumni

## Reflection By: Donna Mullings



The School of Disability Studies at Ryerson University has been paramount in my life and facilitated a significant paradigm shift of how I view the world.

I begin my journey from the perspective and identity as a black disabled woman. I was not born with a disability; I acquired a disability from a motor vehicle accident which left me the minimal use of my lower extremities. My entrance into the world of disability was somewhat confusing and shocking to say the least. At that time, I had already acquired a familiarity with the socially constructed notions of race and gender, but my knowledge of disability was missing, in fact it was non-existent. As I attempted to navigate and make sense of this new world, it quickly became very

clear to me that the fundamental rights I took for granted as an able-bodied person were stripped away from me in an instance. The right to govern my own life and make my own decisions was explicitly in question by medical professionals, friends and family. My body became both an amusement for the able-bodied populace, while my existence was minimized and confined to a petri-dish, constantly examined, prodded and poked.

The School of Disability Studies provided me with the tools to make sense of my life. It provided me with the language to describe my experiences and a social theory that enabled me to contextualize and bring meaning to systematic process of disablement. The political and the personal were unequivocally related. Disability

Studies allowed me to redefine disability from the functionality of one's body to the social systems which govern our lives. It provided me with a new lens to examine and critically analyze the taken-for-granted notions of disability, re-categorize ideas of normalcy and think through concepts of human rights, the utilization of social systems and systematic structures of everyday life. It was quite an emotional process at first, as I often experience the visceral effect with my very own existence.

The meaning and foundation of my life seemingly shattered into tiny pieces of glass, as I had no place to hide and cover from my own notions of self. As a black woman I can shelter myself under the umbrella of my culture and validate my experiences within my own community. Cultural refuge produces a place comfort and the ability to feel coddled from the occurrence of marginalization in the wider dominant society. Existing in the realm of disability, feels as I am on the extreme periphery of life; an experience of marginalization embedded within further marginalization without refuge.

It is within this sphere that the social model of disability intersects with critical race theory, the political economy, and feminism, and provides me with an understanding of how intersectionality intertwines, intersects and plays out in daily life. Disability Studies allows me to unpack and 'peel away at the layers of the onion' to examine whose voice gets heard and why; whose experience are documented and why; which groups are often researched; the privilege position of the researcher and that of the producer of knowledge embedded in ideas of subjective, and objectivity. It allows for greater analysis of the micro and the macro systems of social life. Although I felt my life shattered into tiny pieces of glass, the re-emergence of self and the understanding I gained equipped and empowered me to navigate an explicit ableist world, and it is this knowledge that enables me, in the face of despair, to forge forward, and continue to advocate for the rights of disabled people.

- [Read about Building Respectful Inclusion One Semester at a Time](#) featuring the work of former DST instructor Dr. Fady Shanouda
- Read an article lead by new Asst Prof Jenna Reid with Sarah Snyder, Jiji Voronka, Danielle Landry and Kathryn Church. [Mobilizing Mad Art in the Neoliberal University Resisting Regulatory Efforts by Inscribing Art as Political Practice.](#)
- Watch the [2019 annual activist lecture with Lydia X.Z. Brown](#). (Note: video has not yet been captioned).
- Read a new article titled, [Designing Access Together: Surviving the Demand for Resilience](#) by Esther Ignagni, Eliza Chandler, Kim Collins,

Andy Darby and Kirsty Liddiard.

- Read about the 20th anniversary of the School of Disability, [Small school, big agenda School of Disability Studies celebrates 20 years of activism, changing social thinking and transforming disability education.](#)
- Check out the new article by DST instructor Chelsea Temple Jones and Liz Shek-Noble titled, [‘Who will clean up the mess?’: reflections on media coverage of a human–guide dog pair in Southeast Asia.](#)

## How to keep in Touch

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- If you would like to submit a blog, please write 450-600 words and send it to [kimberlee.collins@ryerson.ca](mailto:kimberlee.collins@ryerson.ca)
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