

## New opportunities, insights came with hearing loss

Melissa Skyer '06 (M.S., environmental science) is a poet, dancer, artist, nature lover and environmental scientist.

Next year, she'll add eco tour guide to the list when she leads a group to Hawaii on behalf of Hands on Travel, a company that organizes tours for people who communicate using American Sign Language. The trip is scheduled for October 2009.

The hearing child of deaf parents, Skyer learned ASL before she could talk and grew up comfortable in both worlds. Her life changed unexpectedly in 2005, when Skyer lost her hearing as the result of surgery to remove a brain tumor. This has not diminished her spirit, however. Quite the contrary.

"I have gained an understanding of diversity and been humbled by this experience," she says. "I have learned the true meaning of perseverance and had to work even harder to achieve my goals."

Skyer completed her degree and moved to Chicago with her boyfriend, Joshua Ramos '06 (environmental management), an environmental engineer. She landed a job with Burns and McDonnell, a major engineering, architecture, construction, environmental and consulting solutions firm, where she has worked on projects including air pollution monitoring, remediating contaminated sites and wetland delineations.

"One positive thing (about being deaf) is that I have become more 'visible,' if you will," Skyer says. "People naturally pay more attention to me when I sit in the front row at a meeting/conference with an interpreter. I take advantage of this fact and use the opportunity to show my capabilities by asking and/or answering questions. It feels good to gain the respect of people in my field and also to defy their preconceptions of what a deaf woman in the sciences is or should be."

Her achievements come as no surprise to her mom, Solange "Sally" Skyer, a counselor and associate professor at National Technical Institute for the Deaf. "I'm very proud of her," she says. "Melissa has a lot to offer and she wants to do all that she can. She won't let anything stop her."

A self-proclaimed "biology nerd," Skyer developed her love of nature at a young age. She and her father, Richard Skyer '79 (biology), who died in 2005, often spent Sundays exploring the land behind their house. "We would investigate everything from deer tracks to different types of trees. That really interested and impacted me and I suppose I have been a tree hugger for quite some time," she says. Her master's degree thesis project involved a two-year study on re-introduced river otters in the Rochester area.

In 2006, Skyer participated in biology professor Robert Rothman's annual tour of the Galapagos Islands, and stayed on for an extra week in Ecuador.

"I realized that I want to eventually start up my own travel company, focusing on naturalist educational tours all over the world," she says. In the meantime, she contacted the owner of Hands on Travel, and they developed a plan for the company's first eco-tour.

"I have been to Hawaii before and we created an exciting itinerary to explore the history, culture, geology and plant and animal life on three different islands," Skyer explains. "I was sure to include kayaking, snorkeling and hiking in the two-week schedule. My passion is environmental science and the natural world, and I can't wait to provide an accessible ecotourism trip!"

For more information about the trip, visit [www.handsontvl.com](http://www.handsontvl.com).



Melissa Skyer '06 will lead an ASL tour of Hawaii in 2009.

Wayne Shipman '79 (GAP) is serving as a village trustee in Fairport, N.Y., after unseating an incumbent in recent elections.

## 1980

Dennis Johnson '80 (GAP) writes, "After five years of living in Frankfurt, Germany, and shooting travel photos throughout Europe, I returned to Washington, D.C., due to my engagement to a high-powered Wall Street working woman. So, I'll be moving to New York City soon and will no doubt fall into some interesting photo-related business. It should be exciting."

Holly VanOrman '80 (SCB) and Bill Fitzpatrick were married on Oct. 14, 2007, in Look Park, Northampton, Mass. They currently reside in Erving, Mass. Lynette Simon Khirallah '81 (CAST), Holly's college roommate, was one of the bridesmaids.

## 1981

James Bossert '81 (CCE) is SVP business continuity manager at Bank of America in Charlotte, N.C. He writes, "In this position, I will use my Six Sigma skills to implement enterprise-wide business continuity plans."

Raymond Kovachik SVP '77 (NTID), '81 (CAST) recently received his professional engineers' licenses in New York and Virginia and is working as a structural engineer on domestic and international projects for military and federal government buildings.



John Passanante '81 (SCB) is an actor in New York City. John writes, "I'm looking for any RIT film people in NYC that could take head shots and give referrals." To contact John, visit the Alumni Online Community at [www.rit.edu/alumni](http://www.rit.edu/alumni).

## 1982

Anne Fitzsimons-Ryan '82 (COLA) is CEO at Ryan Taylor and Harriman Brokerage in Raleigh, N.C.

Rosemary Mall '82 (SCB) was promoted to vice president of Worldwide Localization and Program Management, PSEB Engineering Division of Autodesk Inc.

William Siskar '82 (KGCoe) is general manager at Refcon in Norwood, N.J.

## 1983

Mary Newell Depalma '81, '83 (FAA) writes, "I have written and illustrated my third children's picture book. The Nutcracker Doll tells the story of an eight year old who performs in the Boston Ballet. The book is based on the real life experience of my daughter, Kopley, who is now a junior in college. The Nutcracker Doll is published by Arthur A. Levine Books/Scholastic. Visit [www.marynewelldepalma.com](http://www.marynewelldepalma.com) for more information."

## 1984

William Abraham '84 (CAST) is senior project engineer at Liebert/Emerson Network Power in Columbus, Ohio.