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.

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