

## Valedictorian Speech – Graduating Class 2011

By Vanessa Magee

I thought I would start off by telling you all a little story, of how I ended up in Humanities 101.

I was an average student in high school, scraped by to get my grade 12, and when I was finished, I ran to the working world, and didn't look back. I was content to do my work, in retail or customer service. I had a few fleeting moments in life, when I thought about going to college or university, but my fear of school and uncertainty of what to take quickly extinguished that flame. Time went by, and I eventually found myself working at the Thunder Bay Regional Health Sciences Center, in the housekeeping department. I quickly moved up to specialty cleaner and I was making excellent money for a grade 12 graduate, plus I was contributing to a pension. I was set and happy with that.

In April of 2008 I came down with a fever, and within days, admitted into hospital, and a few weeks later, I found myself in a fight for my mobility. My immune system was attacking my nervous system. That wasn't in my plan. So the last three years I have worked hard to get better, and I have gotten better, but I am nowhere near well enough to go back to the jobs I am qualified for.

That brings me to August of this year. I was in a chronic state of "What now?" I am considered disabled, yet I still felt that I was in the game and ready to kick some ass, which would just bring me back to "What now?"

On August 28<sup>th</sup> I was flying back from British Columbia, I landed in Toronto, and was making my way to the Tim Hortons down the corridor. I had been flying for hours, and I had a four or five hour wait for my Thunder Bay flight. All I wanted was a coffee and to read my magazines. I was almost to Timmies when I heard over the intercom "Vanessa Magee, please come to gate 126." I thought, that's weird, my flight isn't even on the board yet...so I reluctantly walked past Tim Hortons and made my way to gate 126. I walked up to the lady at the gate, and asked her if she had paged me, she said "No." I guess the look on my face told her to do something more for me, so she said "Wait, I'll call upstairs, they sometimes reroute people." She got off the phone and told me that they hadn't paged me either. I bit my tongue, turned, and started my way back four city blocks to the coffee shop. I walked about ten feet, when I heard "Miss Magee, do you want on this flight?" and before I knew it, I had a boarding pass in my hand, and the lady was whisking me to the plane, where they had to open the door to let me in. Talk about last minute! I made my way to my seat, and sat beside an older gentleman. He seemed quite content with reading his book, so he was surely not going to bother me, during the flight, with his life story thus far. All was well with the world again. As I was sitting there, trying to read my Popular Science magazine, I couldn't quite get into it. My mind was trying to figure out how I ended up on that flight. I'm a little obsessive compulsive....I don't do well with change, even if it's for the better. Now I'm about twenty minutes into

the flight, and I state out loud “I have no idea how I ended up on this flight!” The gentleman beside me jumped a little at that, closed his book and asked me what had happened, so I explained. I was hoping to leave it at that. I’m not comfortable talking to strangers, but of course I opened up the gate of conversation, and now I was going to have to endure the art of small talk. He spoke of his wife and children, and how he used to live in Thunder Bay, but choose to move due to his work. I was actually enjoying his story, when he asked, “So what do you do?” and that is when.....I told him my life story thus far!!!!!! I had become the passenger I have avoided in all of my travels. I verbally accosted this man for almost an hour with my ‘What now?’ story. He took in all in, and simply asked me, “Have you ever thought of going back to school?” I was honest and told him that I had thought about it, but I had no idea where to go, who to talk to, what I wanted to take, and I had a slight fear of going back. While I explained all this, he was vigorously digging in his bag. He couldn’t find what he was looking for, so he ripped a piece of paper out of his bag. He scribbled his name and email, a name and email of a colleague of his, and wrote Humanities 101. For the rest of the flight, he explained what the course was about, an introductory course to university. Sounded good to me, so I took the information and told him I would contact his colleague. It wasn’t until I arrived home and googled his name, that I realized who exactly it was that I was sitting beside. His name is Dr. Kim Fedderson, his roots run deep through Lakehead University, and his colleague is Dr. Gillian Siddall, Dean of Social Sciences and Humanities. I had never said the word ‘Dean’ before, and now I had contacts for two of them. The next morning I contacted Gillian, and she had already heard from Dr. Kim Fedderson and also heard my life story thus far. She was excited – I was excited. I met with her the next day, and she explained that the first class was the next evening. I wouldn’t even have time to talk myself out of it. So we filled out the paperwork and I was an LU student fourteen hours after my fateful flight. I went to class the next day.

Humanities 101 – I cannot say enough about this course. Every lecture was stimulating, and there was something to learn from each one, and more important, something to learn about yourself in the process. I learned that I am smarter than I thought, I still leave my homework to the last day.....thought I grew out of that....I can write a pretty good tear jerker when I want to, and most importantly, I learned that I have options. I was in a place in my life where all of the doors seemed shut. I was overwhelmed with my preconceived notions of what secondary education was and my fear of it I now know was unfounded. I have quite a few open doors in front of me now, which one to go through, I’m still not sure about, but I’m not scared anymore to walk through them, and that is a priceless gift!

To Christina, the founder of Humanities 101 – Thank you for all of your hard work getting this course started and keeping it going. You have an enthusiasm that is contagious, and is probably why this course, is what it is, and will continue to be in the future. I’ll throw one of your sayings back at you “You’re Awesome!”

To everyone involved in the Humanities 101 course, Volunteers, Mentors and Professors, your hard work and volunteered time is greatly appreciated. This course is doing great things for our community. I cannot thank you enough.

To my fellow students, I got to know some of you a lot and some of you a little. You are all so very interesting and unique. I learned from you, just as much from this course. I told my little story about my flight, because I truly believe things happen for a reason. I believe that we found our way to Humanities 101 for a reason. Whether it is an agency that referred you, or a friend mentioned it over coffee, or in my case, a booming voice from above that said “For God sake, go that way!!!!” I’m glad you came, and I wish you well on your journey. I hope to run into you in the future and we can share our life stories thus far.

I could talk all night long, but I’m going to stop here....I have a few open doors waiting.....Thank you.