

Jessica Vliegenthart

Speaker Profile



A truly life-changing summer job

One fine morning, as part of a summer job fighting forest fires, Jessica Vliegenthart left home for a few weeks to help stop a 90,000-hectare blaze in the Northwest Territories. The university student was gone seven months.

“My life changed forever,” recalls Jessica. “Another firefighter and I were in a truck, patrolling a back-country dirt road at the fire’s edge. Suddenly, the truck fishtailed; the driver lost control, and I was thrown out of the vehicle.”

Her back was broken, and the sports-minded, kayaking, backpacking young woman became a paraplegic.

Five years later and now 26 years old, she lives independently, attends law school at the University of Victoria and is a medal-winning wheelchair athlete.

Jessica is also part of a partnership between WorkSafeBC and the Canadian Paralympic Committee, sharing her experience in community presentations to raise awareness about workplace safety.

“The pain was so bad I really believed an axe was lodged in my back, and I kept asking the paramedic to remove it,” Jessica says. “Being paralyzed doesn’t kill you, but it hurts a lot.”

Dealing with the injury began with three months of acute care and took, in all, two major back operations; and “surprise heart surgery” to correct a complication from the accident and treat other problems.

Being in hospital left her 60 pounds lighter, “with about two-thirds of the muscle mass in my body lost. I could barely move my arms, couldn’t even lift the book I was reading,” says Jessica. The next stop, a Vancouver rehabilitation centre, “was almost like starting life again from Day One.

“But the rehab professionals were awesome, getting my body into shape and helping me learn so much I once took for granted.” It ranged from “putting on pants when you can’t stand up” to managing a wheelchair in a “world that’s not flat but has curves and bumps and upgrades.”

One imperative after rehab was becoming physically active again. It started in 2006 with wheelchair racing, which “gave me the closest thing I could find to a runner’s high,” and then wheelchair basketball. She is now a starter on the Canadian Women’s Wheelchair Basketball team, competing all over the world. In both sports nationally and internationally, Jessica has earned bronze, silver and gold medals.

Now she trains for a different competition, one reflecting her changed life.

“Ending up in a wheelchair after 21 able-bodied years was an abrupt awakening to what the world is like for marginalized people,” explains Jessica. “For instance, very few places are completely accessible, though most people think accessibility is the rule.”

A law degree will “make my life better by helping other people,” she says, adding that a key issue is keeping people safe. “This is everyone’s responsibility, at all levels.”

“Workers need to follow standard practices and safety rules which includes telling the boss when anything gets in the way of safety. Anything they need to stand up for themselves... For their lives, and the lives of their co-workers.”

“Employers need to help workers do all that by investing in training and supervision, and safety. The investment does pay off in workers who are whole, healthy and productive, and in a stronger bottom line.”

Jessica calls herself lucky. “While traumatic, my injury taught me what strength really is. It’s not how much you can lift or how fast you can run. It’s your core, what’s left when everything else has been ripped away.

“Strength is having a goal that may seem impossible, but is achievable if you choose to fight for it.

“I have the ability to make the choice; and for this, I’m grateful.”