



At home, Leah Bunnett gets out of her wheelchair and crawls around.

LIFE AS LEAH

By Suzy Willig



Bunnett reaches from her wheelchair to adjust a cutlery holder in the dishwasher. She straps herself in and then holds on to drawers and counters and reaches to do dishes. Bunnett does some chores from the floor, but for dishes she needs the height of her chair.



Bunnett removes the laundry from the dryer to make room from the clothes that are sitting in the washing machine. Bunnett does her laundry from the floor, instead of using her wheelchair. She sits between the washer and dryer and transfers the laundry that way.

Leah Bunnett is a Loyalist College student, studying social service work. She unfortunately has cerebral palsy, but she doesn't allow that to stop her.

Bunnett originally intended to attend Loyalist for the early childhood education program, and did. Eventually, she and the college mutually agreed that she didn't meet the physical requirements, so she decided to leave the program.

What she didn't do, was give up on what she really wanted to do. Bunnett, although leaving the ECE program, has been working and volunteering in a daycare. While working with the children indoors, Bunnett will park her wheelchair in the hallway and crawl around with them. When working with them outside, she'll just stay in her chair.

In Canada, lack of mobility, pain, and reduced agility were the three most reported disabilities among young adults aged 15 and over.

Adults were more likely to report some limitations due to pain (11.7 per cent) followed closely by a mobility disability (11.5 per cent), and agility (11.1 per cent). Women reported more of these types of disabilities than men (13.4 per cent mobility, 13.3 per cent pain and 12.4 per cent agility for women versus 9.5 per cent, 10.0 per cent, and 9.7 per cent for men).

"My family was very supportive from day one," said Bunnett.

"They raised me to live a very normal life, and helped me overcome my disability from the very beginning."

Bunnett is a very independent person and her independence is very important to her. She does chores like dishes and laundry just like everyone else. She just has her own way of doing it. When doing dishes, she'll strap herself into her wheelchair, and hold on to the counter while reaching into the dishwasher.

She removes everything from the dishwasher and sets it on the counter, and then puts the dishes that she can reach away – her family has modified their kitchen so certain things that would typically be in a top cupboard is instead in the bottom drawers. Whatever dishes go in the top cupboards, Bunnett just leaves them on the counter for the next person to put away.

When doing laundry, as while doing most other things, Bunnett parks her wheelchair in the main entrance to her home, slides out of it, and crawls around. She sits on her legs on the floor and removes the laundry from the washing machine and transfers it into the dryer, and then drags the basket out of the laundry room to her

room to fold it.

The Bunnett family home has been modified to be fully accessible. The front entrance is accessible, the drawers in the kitchen are modified, the washer and dryer directly on the floor, the microwave is in a very low cupboard, and the freezer is a bottom drawer type. All of these things contribute to Leah living a normal, capable life. There are some things about her disability, though, that stand out and she can't do anything to change it.

"Sometimes it's frustrating when you travel to Ottawa or Toronto and you're trying to go somewhere and it's not wheelchair accessible."

"One time, my friends planned this whole day for me, and I asked where it was and they wouldn't tell me because they wanted to keep it a secret, so I asked, 'Well does it have stairs?' and they were like 'Oh, yeah it does.' And they had to cancel the whole thing."

Some buildings just aren't wheelchair accessible, which can be frustrating for Bunnett. Her family and friends sometimes forget about her disability and that she needs places to be fully accessible though, because they've made full plans for Bunnett, for a birthday or other special occasion, not even thinking to find a place that's fully accessible because they forgot she couldn't walk.

Bunnett doesn't let things like that get to her. She is an extremely happy, up-beat person who loves watching her favourite television show, loves children and working with them, and hopes to work with them full-time in the future. She loves her family with whom she's very close, and loves her friends, three in particular who are very close to her and she sees quite often.

Bunnett plans on opening a new chapter of her life in the New Year. She plans on moving out of her parents' home and into specialized low-income housing on her own. She's excited to have her own place and have people there for her to help her with the things she can't do on her own.

She's not nervous, because she's had a taste of living on her own when she lived in residence during the early childhood education program. One of her good friends was there with her, and they'd ride the bus together to go to the grocery store, or to the mall, etc.

Bunnett thinks moving out will not only be a relatively new, fun experience for her, but that she's opening the door to the rest of her life, and it's very important to her independence.



Bunnett sits with her friends Katherine Govier (left) and Melodie Matthews (middle) to exchange Christmas gifts early as they're all getting very busy with school and work.



Bunnett removes her leg braces and specialized shoes once she gets home. Bunnett finds them uncomfortable and doesn't like to wear them when she doesn't have to.

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