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Idealism to reality: yesterday and today

Maria Barile

In 1993, I got my Masters in Social Work from McGill University. Four barriers have hampered my goals in this chosen area.

In the 1980s and 1990s, I studied social work with idealism. I really wanted to throw myself into the international scene, change the world, improve the living conditions of persons with disabilities and in particular those of women with disabilities. But this idealism instilled by social work was quickly dissipated when I was faced with many different obstacles and even direct discrimination against an applicant with a disability. When I applied to an agency for people with disabilities, I was told, despite my degree in social work, it would certainly be great to work with the "patients" themselves, but I could not serve the families of people with this type of disability. Yes, agencies totally influenced by the medical model. The local community service center (CLSC) used the fact that I do not have a car to refuse me a job. Another obstacle was my lack of knowledge of the official language of Québec. But at the time, the biggest obstacle was the unemployment among people with disabilities, a harsh reality showing that 70% of us were unemployed, coupled with the fact that I chose for personal and family reasons to live in Montreal. I finally found a temporary job as an instructor in the Department of Social Service of Dawson College. But that only lasted a semester. Government cutbacks had the effect of a tidal wave on employment. It was not until two years after my graduation that I had the opportunity to work with an experienced researcher, Dr. Catherine Fichten of Dawson College. Along with Jennison Asuncion, we created a research network. At present, we codirect Adaptech composed of a team of researchers, students and consumers. Since 1996, we have conducted several studies on university students with various types of disabilities in Canada. We are based at Dawson College in Montreal. The focus is on three research areas: information technology, including our large inventory of free or inexpensive software to facilitate the use of computers, academic success, facilitators of academic success and obstacles, and, more recently, employment. For more information on our work, visit www.adaptech.org.

During the sixteen years devoted to this field, we have obtained data indicating the lack of participation of students with disabilities in postsecondary institutions. Then slowly but surely, the numbers began to rise. This increase is also reflected in the employment. According to one of our recent studies on employment, 61% of 166 respondents said they had a job. One hundred (100) of them were women with an employment rate of 63 %, 59% of the remaining 66 men also

worked.

Education is vital, which is why I decided to continue my studies but in a new area: a Masters in accessibility and universal design, intersecting my two passions: accessibility and "green policies ". I am a consultant for Eco -access, to assist groups who want to have offices and inclusive conferences. I audit buildings and I direct people to the appropriate resources. For more information, visit www.ecoaccess.info. My desire to change the world has taken a different turn.

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