Updating the story and learning what it means to live well

By Connie Schwalb
Grasslands News

Each of us has a story. We tend to think that story simply starts at our birth and is written out as we live.

But there are moments when the narrative we’re living changes abruptly and completely, that it becomes the beginning of a completely different saga. But these ‘plot twists’ are unpredictable.

A circumstance that seemed to herald tragedy can instead lead to victory. The very thing that seemed poised to ‘ruin’ our lives might instead propel us into something better than we’d ever envisioned.

When that happens, the person we become within this new narrative might surprise us.

Last track, Adaptive Waterskier Blake Lamontagne (who is originally from Wawota) shared his story with students in an upper year Kinesiology class at the University of Regina.

For Blake, this was an opportunity to “update” a story he first shared with students years ago.

“I met Brenda Rossow-Kimball a few years ago through some programming while I was with Spinal Cord Injury Saskatchewen, and she asked me to come and speak to her Kinesiology 241 class at the university in 2018.

When I spoke then, I was telling them about the things I set out to do in the university in 2018. I wanted them to ask me questions or comments, I didn’t want them to wait until the end. I wanted them to stay engaged throughout the presentation and a slideshow. But even though it’s my own story, those presentations sometimes make it feel ‘scripted’. Maybe that’s because I have to stay on the spot, while that topic was front of mind. And what they said generally didn’t make sense” he adds with a laugh.

“Normally, I go in with a formal presentation. Blake says that he chose to speak to her class in order to give them an opportunity to gain insights into the experience of living with a disability which they can take into both their professional and personal lives.

“In my class, we stress the importance of talking to people with lived experience. The class focuses on disability and how that experience is socially constructed. Our infrastructure, along with many of our policies and attitudes can intensify the experience of disability.

“For example, we talk about ‘ableism’ in class. That’s the notion that the best way to live is if you are an able-bodied person. Our infrastructure tends to be ableist for example, because it isn’t accommodating for somebody using a mobility aid. Even those things that are constructed to be ‘accessible’ often aren’t.

“Many of my students will go on to become Physical and Occupational Therapists, or work in other areas of the Health Care system. I believe that it is our job (both as health care professionals and as members of our community) to alleviate that.

“Doing that job begins with listening to people who are living with a disability. My hope is that by listening to Blake and others living with disability, my students will start to think about what they might be doing to perpetuate ableism in their practice or in how they interact with people in general.

“Rather than giving a ‘formal presentation’ Blake says that he chose to have a conversation with the students, an approach that he says he might adopt more often in the future.

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“This time, I got to tell the students that I’ve done the things I set out to do in 2018 and talk about how I got from there to here. And I talked about some of the adversity and obstacles that I’ve faced along the way.”

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