A voice for people with disabilities

Student sees the law as a path to activism and advocacy

W
ho better to advocate for people with disabilities than a lawyer with disabilities? That’s the reasoning of Rebecca Wylie, a third-year student planning to graduate with a law degree and health law certificate in May 2015. Wylie uses a wheelchair, writes with her mouth, and wants to “be as normal as possible.” She’s learned through personal experience that her calling is advocating for society’s disadvantaged. “I know what it’s like to not be able to afford health care,” she says. “I’ve been to three of their concerts. It’s just really chill music.”

STUDENT PROFILE: REBECCA WYLIE

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Q: You were a self-employed graphic designer before applying to law school. Why make that transition?
A: When I graduated with a degree in graphic design from the University of Missouri in 2007, the economy was still good. But systematically, people with disabilities spend a lot of time finding employment, and they’re unemployed or underemployed in greater numbers than the general population.

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Q: Tell us about your background.
A: I’m the oldest of four children, and I just turned 29. When I was 7, I became a quadriplegic. I have very minimal use of my hands and really no use of my legs. I have what’s known as transverse myelitis. It’s a rare disorder that causes swelling in the spinal cord. Instead of your immune system fighting off the cause of the swelling, it starts attacking itself. The only thing preventing myself from physically functioning like everyone else is that a two millimeter section of the myelin sheath in my spinal cord is missing tissue where my body attached itself.

Q: Where do you plan to work after graduation?
A: Most of my experience is in the public interest field. That’s my passion. Whether that self financially sustain me and my need for long-term care is up in the air. I’ve started to think the government is where I might like to end up, doing policy or enforcement work.

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Q: What would people be surprised to learn about you?
A: I’ve recently taken the L. I’d lived in the Chicago area my whole life and never taken it because only about 60 percent of stations are accessible, and that number drops significantly when you consider things like broken elevators. Now I’ve taken it downtown, to street festivals, and to see concerts. I also really like cooking. Listening to music—from Nirvana to Benny Goodman—and watching movies is a real passion for me.

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