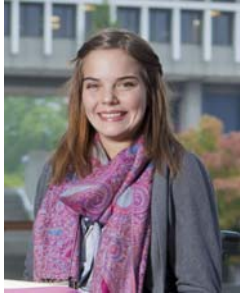


JESSICA KRUGER SPEAKER PROFILE

A lesson that shouldn't be learned the hard way



When she was six, Jessica Kruger went to 37 countries on a four-year sailing trip with her family. Back home in Coquitlam, she found a typical Canadian childhood again.

That ended at 15 and Kruger's first real job, with a company that painted houses. "It wasn't easy, but paid more than a fast-food restaurant. And I loved the high work." On the tenth day, she fell from the second storey of a house and broke her neck in four places.

Kruger shares her experiences now at community events like this year's Day of Mourning Ceremony that commemorates British Columbians who died at work in 2010.

In a wheelchair now, Kruger has a good left hand, the right one weak and dysfunctional, and paralysis in most of her lower body.

Coming back wasn't easy. She started rehab and was "forced to depend on other people to do things for me — getting dressed, showering, everything. It was months before I could transfer on my own, shifting from wheelchair to couch or bathtub. In my life, transfers never end."

Slowly, growing stronger, Kruger began to "really push myself." An example was refusing to miss school doing the first part of Grade 10 in rehab. She earned As and Bs in four classes and a PE credit for physiotherapy.

"The accident doesn't stop me from living my life. I generally find ways to do things when it seems I can't, or I get help from someone. That applies to the two big things in my life now."

One is wheelchair rugby, a tough mixed-gender contact sport where Kruger is working to represent Canada at the Paralympics. Her other big thing is Simon Fraser University, where she focuses on psychology and English.

Meanwhile, Kruger sometimes thinks back to her accident. "On good days, I see it as one of those things. Everyone experiences loss in life, and I got my dose early."

She deals with the bad times "the best way I can, and I move forward. But the reality is that there's no going back to who I once was.

"I'm looking at the rest of my life without legs. And I'm one of the lucky ones — unlike the 143 people who died trying to earn a living in B.C. last year."

Jessica wants to honour them, and remind all B.C. workers and employers how crucial on-the-job safety is.

"It's as black-and-white as anything can be. You're in one piece, or you're not. You're in a wheelchair, or you're not. You're alive or you're not.

"Take it from me. It's that simple, and something you definitely don't want to learn the hard way."

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