

Blake Lamontagne

# Updating the story and learning what it means to live well

By Connie Schwalm

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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 so 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 week, 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 Saskatchewan, 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 all of the things that I wanted to do, what I wanted to accomplish, and how I was going to get there. So, this was a really cool opportunity because it gave me the chance to go back and give the 'updated' version of my story.

"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."

Professor Brenda Rossow-Kimball



## Blake Lamontagne

In a presentation that he gave to an upper Kinesiology class at the University of Regina recently, Lamontagne shared his story, talking about the adversity he has overcome and his success as a World-Class Adaptive Water-skiier.

says that she asked Blake 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 per-

sonal 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 so 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.

"Normally, I go in with a formal 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 point or my slides don't make sense" he adds with a laugh.

"This time, I just went in and spoke from the heart. I did have a plan, and idea about what I'd like to say and what points I wanted to bring out. But basically, this was really more of a conversation, because if a student had questions or comments, I didn't want them to wait until the end. I wanted them to ask me on the spot, while that topic was front of mind. And what they said generally dictated where I went next with the story.

because what I said next is often based on their feedback and the questions I get.

"So, this felt very free. I wasn't restricted by any 'script'. And after I left the class, I felt that I couldn't have been more in the 'right place' than I was at that moment. Everything felt so natural. I just loved it. This is definitely something that I want to get into more."

It was an approach that Professor Rossow-Kimball says had a profound and potentially lasting impact on her students.

"I asked a student I was chatting with the next day what they had thought about Blake's presentation. That student told me, 'I have ADHD. So, I have trouble paying attention in class. But I was focused on Blake the entire time he spoke. I didn't feel that he was talking at me. He was talking to me.'

"Blake came in with an incredibly positive perspective. He talked about not living well and being in a deep depression after his injury. But when he discovered adaptive waterskiing, that all began to change.

"That came about because of people who were committed to being positive role models in Blake's life. My hope is that, by hearing Blake's story, my students might gain a better understanding of who they might be in someone else's life, and how they might help someone living with a disability to live well.

Blake notes that having the chance to 'update' his story for the class has given him a broader perspective on the circumstances he has lived through.

"When I read some of the comments from the students who heard me in 2018, it kind of blew me away. At that time, I didn't think I had a story. I kept bridging back to Rick Hansen and to other people because I didn't think I had enough of my own story to tell.

"I always felt that I had to accomplish more. I thought that I had to start the story where I am now, where I'm the World Champion, because I needed to have some accolade or accomplishment attached to my name in order to be 'somebody' that others wanted to listen to. Maybe that was a barrier I placed on myself.

"So, when I saw how much the students had gotten out of hearing me speak then, it surprised me. I realized that people were paying attention and watching the whole time. I thought the story had to start at 'one day' but they wanted to hear about 'day one'.

He goes on to say that he hopes the insights he's gained by sharing his story will enable him to help others become the heroes in their own stories.

"I remember I used to go and sit at the approach where the accident had happened. That was my 'thinking spot'. Sometimes, I'd vent or cry and wonder why this had happened to me. I was 16 and I had my whole life in front of me. I wasn't the greatest hockey or baseball player, but I was pretty good, and that was my dream. That was all I wanted to do. It all got taken away and all I could think was 'What now? What next?'

"But I feel now that maybe all of that was meant to build my story, so I could do things like this. My struggles made me who I am today. So now, I can turn around and help other people. There's been people in my life who did that for me. So, being in a position now where I can pay it forward, and be an influence like that for others, is one of my proudest accomplishments."

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