

Yates thanks Parkwood for her ticket to freedom

Alicia Yates has two words to describe those times when things pile up, press down, spill over and generally threaten to squash her spirit.

"Some days, I do have my 'muffin moments,' as my stepmom likes to call them," says Yates. "You know, muffin moments: You feel sorry for yourself, you think, 'You poor thing.' But I get over it."

I think it's fair to say the obstacles that prompt her "muffin moments" are the kind of challenges that, to many of us, might resemble mountains.

Because three years ago, Yates's life took an unexpected turn. It was just two days

OPINION

IAN GILLESPIE



THE CITY

before her 20th birthday and Yates was in the midst of taking what she calls "the classic year off, trying to figure out where I'm going and what I'm going to do with my life."

But that youthful freedom ended on a wintry day in February 2002, when the vehicle in which Yates was riding collided head-on with another outside Shakespeare, east of

Stratford. The driver of the other vehicle was killed.

Yates, who was riding in the right-side rear seat, suffered a spinal cord injury that left her paralysed below the waist.

"Now wherever I go, I drag my legs with me," she says with a smile.

Yates lost her ability to walk, but she clearly hasn't lost her sense of humour.

And thanks to a special program at Parkwood Hospital, Yates has retained much of her independence, too.

Yates is one of about 20 people who've learned to drive with the hospital's New Driver Certificate Program since it started in 2003. Combining 25 hours of classroom study with 12 hours of on-the-road training, the program utilizes

a specially trained driving instructor, an occupational therapist and two vehicles adapted to suit the disparate needs of disabled drivers.

"A lot of them never thought they'd be able to drive," says Monique MacDonald, the program's occupational therapist. "So when they find out they can and they're able to do it, they're ecstatic."

The fee-for-service program, which MacDonald says is the only one of its kind in Ontario, has served students coping with cerebral palsy, spina bifida, spinal cord and brain injuries, dyslexia, illiteracy and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder.



DEREK RUTTAN The London Free Press

STILL MOBILE: Paraplegic Alicia Yates gained a new measure of independence by learning to drive in a Parkwood Hospital program.

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GILLESPIE: Disabled driver proud of her wheels

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"We have a maximum of five people in a class at a time," says MacDonald.

"Because they have learning disabilities, cognitive disabilities, physical disabilities or a combination of these, we have to make sure we're able to give them the one-on-one attention they need.

Each driver has different needs. MacDonald says some drivers utilize a high-tech computer screen and joystick to direct their vehicle. And some, like Yates, navigate the streets with simpler hand con-

trols.

Yates' specially adapted 2004 Chevy Venture Enter-van features a spinner knob mounted on the steering wheel to enable her to steer with one hand. Her other hand, of course, is busy controlling the gas and brakes. She pushes a lever forward to brake, and pulls the lever toward herself to accelerate.

But that's not all. The van, which cost \$80,000 with its modifications, also features automatic doors, a 1.2-metre side ramp, a hydraulic system that lowers the vehicle

when the ramp is deployed, and a six-way driver's seat that lets Yates spin round and slide into her wheelchair.

Before she acquired the van, Yates says she depended on family and special transit services to get around. But that wasn't always easy.

"Now, I don't have to worry about calling ahead and booking the bus, or cancelling the bus, or wondering if they have a driver who can come and get me," she says. "I can come and go as I please."

Yates says the ability to

drive her own vehicle was instrumental in helping her land a job as a host at Montana's Cookhouse on Wellington Street. Now, she's able to work a shift on short notice — something she couldn't do when she had to book a special bus in advance.

"This is my baby," says Yates, referring to her van. "This is my ticket to freedom."

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