

May 15, 2008

Tappan man overcomes disability to earn master's degree



*Hema Easley
The Journal News*

Just a few days ago, Scott Salmon unpacked the purple gown and gold-colored master's hood he would wear at his graduation ceremony.

It was only then that it began to sink in that his long-held dream of earning a master's degree in social work was about to come true.

Yesterday, Salmon graduated along with hundreds of other New York University students at a ceremony at Yankee Stadium.

Along with him were his parents, Dan and Elie Salmon, his sister and his two grandmothers - the core support group that made his success possible.

"I think that's so unbelievable," said Salmon, who will turn 26 tomorrow.

"I never thought I would be at this point. First, I never thought I would get into the master's program. I just thought there would be some kind of barriers - work load, field work."

Since he was diagnosed with cerebral palsy at 7 months old, Salmon has been fighting barriers.

He uses a electric wheelchair with a joystick control because he has limited use of his hands.

He can't dress himself or shave or brush his teeth. He needs to be lifted in and out of his wheelchair.

He can feed himself if food is prepared and presented, and he can type, though slowly, by using one

finger.

The physical challenges have been daunting, but early on Salmon learned to make the best of his abilities, said Jerry Staller, division director of educational and clinical services at Jawonio, a regional resource for people with disabilities, where Salmon has been receiving services since he was diagnosed.

Staller has been his physical therapist for years.

When doctors tried to make him walk and failed, Salmon became the best wheelchair-user he could be, Staller said.

When his limited motor skills didn't allow him to write papers for school, Salmon adapted by using a voice-recognition program on his computer, he said.

"He teaches you that all those things are worth trying," Staller said. "He teaches you how to make the best of what you have. That's really humbling."

The going hasn't always been easy.

At Tappan Zee High School, where he was mainstreamed, Salmon began feeling lonely and depressed about his disability.

But it made him realize how much more important it was for him as a disabled person to have credentials.

As he became older, his drive became stronger.

After high school, he went on to Edinboro University in Pennsylvania to earn a bachelor's degree in psychology. In 2005, he was accepted at NYU in the master's program in social work.

There he met Regi Mathew, a professor at NYU who became his mentor.

She has post-polio syndrome, and their individual disabilities became a point of connection.

Though Mathew has worked with many students with disabilities, Salmon's hard work and determination impressed her and she took him to lecture with her at Adelphi University.

"Scott is a student who really stretches himself, challenges himself in any way possible," Mathew said.

"This is a story about how, when society provides the support, such individuals can succeed. It's not just a question of individual heroics. ... If helped, we can be contributing members of society."

Salmon attributes his success to all of those who have supported him - his family, the Jawonio staff and his fellow students, as well as the ongoing help he has received from friends and teachers through the years.

He now wants to work as an advocate and help form policy for people with disabilities so that their voices can be heard.

"He could have stopped anywhere along the line and (have been) successful," Staller said. "He

wanted to have what everyone else has. I don't know if he's done yet."
