

cover story



Jessie was raised with a mixture of homeschooling and unschooling (allowing children to learn by following their interests rather than a school curriculum). She did well for herself in customer service roles, but always harbored some insecurity and shame about her lack of formal education.

When the COVID pandemic hit, Jessie's education-savvy wife researched opportunities to help Jessie overcome her perceived deficits and found the Niagara College Academic Upgrading program.

Jessie started upgrading her skills with a math class. Soon, conversations with her math professor and a social worker got her thinking about potential career paths.

Her social worker suggested that Jessie's interests might make her a good social service worker.

With a clearer vision for her future, Jessie stepped out of the math course and into an ACE Communications class. "Academic Upgrading was such a pivotal step in my journey," Jessie says.

The positive feedback she received gradually transformed her mindset from fearing she was not good enough to understanding that she could handle postsecondary education. In fact, she excelled — maintaining honours standing in every semester of the Social Service Worker program.

During her postsecondary program, Jessie earned a student position in the Career Services Office working with unhoused people through a government summer student work program. The skills she developed in these roles undoubtedly helped her land her current, full-time job supporting vulnerable populations receiving legal support in Ontario.

"Asking for help and getting support is key," advises Jessie. "Utilize the resources that you have — not just at the college, but in your region." Finally, she advises other would-be students to "Believe you are worth taking an opportunity."

— Jessica Berez, Niagara College