

## Jessica wants to be the 'Game Changer' for others with challenges



**By Brock Weir**

Aurora's Jessica Coriat has always had a hunger for independence.

Growing up with cerebral palsy, her mobility was usually limited to a walker or a wheelchair and she had difficulty doing many of the things so many people take for granted in their own lives. Her life changed, however, when she became involved with Toronto Rehab Foundation.

Nearly seven years since this initial encounter, her mobility and independence has markedly improved and, for her, it is high time to return the favour.

Jessica is a devoted volunteer at Toronto Rehab, helping patients experiencing similar challenges get back on their feet and achieve the same independence. For her work, she is a finalist in Scotiabank's Game Changers competition.

The Game Changers program salutes individuals in Ontario, Saskatchewan, and Alberta who demonstrate leadership as difference makers in their communities in the areas of health, education, social services, arts, sports, and the environment. If selected and the ultimate winner is determined by a public vote the ultimate winner will not only win a trip to Saskatchewan this fall for the 2013 Grey Cup, but \$25,000 to the charity of choice.

For Jessica, that choice was clear.

‘These are the people that gave me pretty much all my independence,’ she tells The Auroran. ‘They literally taught me how to eat, how to drink, how to carry food, and how to use a walker safely.’

Within the program, Jessica is no longer just a patient. She is an active volunteer, trying to be the game changer she feels is necessary for each person to, like her, get into the world and go from strength to strength.

‘I want to teach them,’ she says. ‘Because I have used [assistive devices] for so long, I can now teach people. [As a game changer] you get to change how patients view their rehab, view the staff, students and nurses and doctors and instead of everything looking all clinical and the place looking sterile, it looks like it is a really friendly environment. We all have one common goal when we come to work every day – help our patients get back on their feet and get them on the road to recovery.’

Jessica makes the trip from Aurora to Toronto Rehab several days a week. As she leaves each day, she is watched with pride by her parents Lynn and David. When Jessica was born several weeks premature 23 years ago this week, doctors soon observed the signs

Jessica might have cerebral palsy. When parents were told, panic set in.

“You have gone through the trauma of having a premature baby and now you have this whole trauma of being told she will never walk or talk,” recalls Lynn. “You fall apart from the beginning because you want the very best for your child.”

Jessica, however, proved the doctors wrong. After a series of surgeries, she started talking and then walking with a very tiny walker just before Kindergarten. Her parents remember watching anxiously as she made those first tentative steps at school, walking from the classroom to the library with slow, deliberate determination.

“She got down that hallway and she has never looked back,” says Lynn.

This independent streak was something they observed from a very early age with their daughter. They agree that Jessica has never been one to see herself as “disabled.” The fact Toronto Rehab nominated her as a Game Changer means the world to them.

“The fact she was able to get that many votes and her story meant something to even total strangers shows that she is a very independent lady who wants to help spread the word about disabilities and that she is just like everyone else,” says David. “Volunteering fulfils her goals. It makes her feel wanted and a part of the community. She wants to be like every other person working. She wants to get a paycheque. That is very, very important to her. She is working hard and she’ll succeed.”

For Jessica, your vote will be not just a vote of confidence in her, but a vote of support for the “amazing” work Toronto Rehab has done to help her.

“The transformation I have seen in my own life is truly remarkable,” she says. “Please support and help myself with other patients at Toronto Rehab to be the best they can be and get home to their families sooner.”

To vote for Jessica, visit [www.scotiabankgamechangers.com](http://www.scotiabankgamechangers.com).