

Potential employee just wants chance to prove herself



By Brock Weir

Thirteen years ago, Kerry Grieco was spending July preparing for what promised to be one of the most exciting times in her life.

18-years-old, and fresh out of Cardinal Carter Catholic High School, she was preparing to study early childhood education at Seneca College, pursuing her dream of becoming a kindergarten teacher.

Just a month into her studies, however, Kerry was diagnosed with a brain tumour.

The subsequent surgeries, radiation and chemotherapy left her with mental and physical challenges, including some weakness on her right side and short term memory loss. Now 31, however, she has repeatedly defied the odds, working with children throughout the school year at a Newmarket school, as well as filling her time as a dishwasher at Aurora's Panera Bread.

"The people are really happy to see me all the time," says Kerry of working at Panera Bread. "I also volunteer at the Aurora Seniors' Centre and a lot of them are very friendly and helpful towards me. It gives me something to do and I am not struggling with anything there. I like dealing with people and being active."

But, a recent job interview for a similar dishwashing job at the Swiss Chalet restaurant on First Commerce Drive left Kerry and her family disappointed.

"It was very quick," says Kerry of her meeting with store owner Mona Karim. "She came in, we introduced ourselves, she asked me what I wanted to do and I told her I wanted to wash dishes. She kind of just looked at me and said, 'I don't think you could really do it.'"

When asked how that made her feel, Kerry said "not good," before elaborating that she asked the store owner if she could simply give it a whirl to see if she was up to the task.

They made an appointment for last Tuesday at 5 p.m.

She and her father, Bill Hogg, returned at the appointed hour, but they were made to wait. After over 30 minutes, Mr. Hogg says they reached Ms. Karim by phone.

'She recounted to me twice using the language, 'I didn't think she was capable of doing the job,' recalls Mr. Hogg. 'At that point in time, I said, 'I am really struggling with this concept that you have already made the decision my daughter is not capable of doing something before she is even given the opportunity to try.' I said I found that extremely disrespectful.

'After I spoke to her, it was evident to me this was not a place I wanted my daughter working at given the behaviour I had personally seen. I just took Kerry home. There was no way I was going to even have her attempt to wash dishes there. There was no way she was going to work in that environment.'

Ms. Karim, the owner and operator of the First Commerce Drive location, as well as a restaurant in Newmarket, however, disputes Mr. Hogg's assertion, branding this 'a very unfortunate situation.'

'We are an employer that supports equal opportunities,' says Ms. Karim, noting she currently has disabled employees at her restaurants through working with YMCA employment programs. 'We are advocates in our community.'

'I didn't say [I didn't think she would be able to do the job], I said 'Our [dishwashing equipment] is very heavy.' I wanted to make sure that for health and safety that she was safe. She really wanted to try it and I said, 'If you were comfortable, I'll give you a couple of shifts, no problem. Her father kept saying 'You're trying to say she is not capable and I said, 'I didn't say that. I said let her try and make sure she is comfortable because not everyone is comfortable.' It is heavy equipment and I just wanted to make sure she was comfortable, and I shouldn't have said that and I apologise. It is an unfortunate situation.'

While Ms. Grieco and Mr. Hogg were left disappointed, if not angry, by the experience, Kerry's story is not a unique one as so many people with varying degrees of mental and physical impairments seek gainful 'and, most importantly, meaningful 'employment.

Since her recovery, Kerry says she has given out many resumes without anything coming from it. Bill says they, and others in similar situations, receive a helping hand through programs designed to help those facing challenges enter the workforce by building resumes and driving them to drop off their CVs.

'It is a legitimate struggle for people to find work for people like this,' says Mr. Hogg. 'Even if you speak to people who have gone and hired people, there would be two fundamental things that come forward: one, those people who have hired people with different levels of disability, it is difficult to find a role that they can work in that genuinely adds value. That is important for any business person. It is not charity, it is about finding a role this person can do.

'The second part is when they do find a role for them they are invariably extremely happy with the outcome. Someone who has a disability is very appreciative of the job. They take it very seriously. They recognize they are lucky to have been able to find the job. There is a huge difference between volunteering and getting paid to do something. It brings a sense of self-esteem. It would be easy for a lot of folks with disabilities just to sit around and do nothing, but they work hard at low paying jobs and the net benefit is not significant, but they want to do it because it gets them out into society, gives them an opportunity to feel useful and is an opportunity to interact with people.'

And, at the end of the day, that is all that Kerry wants.

All she wants to do, she says, is find a job working with people and a chance 'to make improvements.' The problem is getting one's foot in the door.

'It's important for people to know that having a job, for me, would help me feel more normal,' she explains, giving an example of someone talking down to her. 'I am 31-years-old, I am not a kindergarten student. I don't know how to say this without being mean, but I feel that people walk on tiptoes around me because I have a brain injury. I don't like it when people treat me like I am stupid. I do need extra time and extra help with certain things, but I don't like people to act like it is a big deal. I don't like people acting as though they need to act in a certain way around me.

?I tell [potential employers] that I always do my best. I always try my hardest, give it my all, so in that way no one can come up to me and say, 'Can you move faster?' No, I can't. I'm going as fast as I can and doing the best I can.?