

Local playwright challenges perceptions of "invisible disability" with comedy



By Brock Weir

They locked eyes on the subway but, as is so often the case on public transportation, they swiftly looked away. But Morgan Frey knew the woman sitting near her had noticed her missing hand, and had noticed she was struggling to hold on as the train moved. Unfortunately, this was not a new experience for the 26-year-old Aurora woman, who was born a multiple amputee, as she went about her business.

‘The lady looked at me, saw I was missing my hand, and I was wearing pants so she couldn’t see my prosthetic legs,’ Morgan recalls. ‘She saw I couldn’t hold on but didn’t do anything until I accidentally hit her with my bag.’ She apologized, but told the woman she couldn’t hold on and the seated woman said she didn’t notice.

‘But, you looked right at me! I saw you!’ says Morgan, of the inner monologue that followed.

In the year that just passed, Ms. Frey shared her story of growing up as a War Amp Champ as the War Amps celebrated its 100th anniversary. Now, at the start of a new year, she is looking forward to further opportunities of helping people open their eyes as she channels her experiences into a new play, which is set to open later this year as part of the Toronto Fringe Festival. Tentatively entitled ‘Benefits Lapse’, the play follows a woman named Jenna who is living with a disability. She’s tasked with writing an essay for school and picks the topic of disability and begins a journey of learning about her rights as well as the service gaps Canadians with disabilities face.

‘I learned a lot [while writing] and I felt like I should have known this information,’ she says.

Until she dove deeper into her role as playwright, the foundations of Ms. Frey’s knowledge of navigating life with a disability stemmed from her experiences with the War Amps. Becoming involved with the organization as an infant, the reality is she doesn’t know life without the support the organization routinely provides to thousands of Canadians living with various physical challenges. She first became aware of being involved with the War Amps around the age of six or seven when she was fully able to appreciate the myriad programs they offer, including summer camps.

‘These programs definitely helped because my parents were not expecting me to be born like this,’ she explains. ‘They provided a lot of emotional support, provided limbs and taught how to raise a kid who was missing limbs. The seminars were a big part of my life and my parents could go and meet other parents and see that it wasn’t just them, that there were other people as well with kids.’

‘In school, I was the only kid, so it was nice to be around other kids, be able to say, ‘I just gotta take my leg off!’ and not have it be this weird thing. Kids in the program would say, ‘me too’ and it was nice to have other people understand. I could talk to my friends, but they wouldn’t be able to understand.’

Ms. Frey requires two artificial legs and, as she grew, she often outgrew her prosthetics. New ones were needed every two years, which can be costly, as well as a challenge to break them in. She likens getting used to a new pair of prosthetics to getting used to walking on stilts, causing a particular challenge trying to climb the stairs.

Nevertheless, she was an avid dancer and figure skater growing up. She once used a myoelectric arm that allowed her to hold paper and tie her shoes, but gave that up at the age of 14 when, frustrated by the weight of the prosthetic, she learned how to do all these

tasks without it.

After graduating from high school, Ms. Frey taught dance for a year before going to Humber College for comedy writing and performance, later holding down a job in communications with the War Amps, but now she's back to her comedy and performance roots, ready to take on sometimes heady issues in her new play.

It fits in with the Tree of Life Theatre Company's mandate [of fostering works with] a social or political issue, and growing up with a disability was a huge social issue that no one really talks about, or it is only viewed in certain ways. That is not how we are at all! I wanted it to be a comedy that will have people laughing, sometimes thinking, 'Oh, shit, maybe I shouldn't be laughing!' But that's okay they learn!

My play is about living with an invisible disability. Because I am so mobile I used to dance and it doesn't look like I'm missing both my feet I just want people to be aware. I would like people to open their eyes, be aware, and not be in their own space. It is what it is. Like on the subway, you can be in your own little space, on your phone, but this woman wasn't, and she didn't do anything. That happens to me all the time on the subway and on buses. That is hard to convey in a play because you can't just build a bus!?

Morgan Frey's play, tentatively titled 'Benefits Lapse' is set to play at the Toronto Fringe Festival between July 3 and 14, just one of over 150 shows that will fill Toronto venues during the festival. A portion of ticket sales will benefit War Amps Canada.