



For immediate release:

Scholarship supports promising research careers of graduate students with disabilities

November 28, 2011 – Making public parks more accessible and understanding how the human body compensates after the loss of an eye are what Jason Angel and Stefania Moro hope to accomplish with their research. The two graduate students are the latest recipients of a unique scholarship aimed at helping burgeoning scientists living with a disability to pursue and advance a career in rehabilitation research.

Called the *TD Grant in Medical Excellence: A Scholarship in Rehabilitation Related Research for People with Disabilities*, the award provides funding for students with disabilities pursuing a career in rehabilitation research. The scholarship is administered by Toronto Rehabilitation Institute (Toronto Rehab) and is open to students from several universities in Ontario: McMaster, Ryerson, University of Toronto, Waterloo, York and Wilfrid Laurier.

Among the first of its kind in Canada, the scholarship will provide \$20,000 each to Jason and Stefania, who now join a growing list of 12 graduate students who have received one-time and renewed awards since the scholarship's inception. Since 2006, TD Bank Financial Group has pledged \$550,000 to support the program, which was created by Toronto Rehab and its foundation to engage people with disabilities in a meaningful way in rehabilitation research.

"This scholarship enhances the relevance and quality of rehabilitation research and breaks down the barriers that students with disabilities often face when pursuing higher education," says Dr. Geoff Fernie, Institute Director of Research, Toronto Rehabilitation Institute, University Health Network, who developed the idea for the scholarship. "This is important because out of the four million people living with a disability in Canada, only about eight per cent complete a bachelor's degree, and even fewer complete a graduate degree."

Having grown up in the rural woods of Maine, Jason has always had a love of the outdoors and travel. This passion continued after a car crash in 1990 which left him with a spinal cord injury.

"My spirit of adventure didn't end when I started using a wheelchair," says Jason. "I realized how environmental barriers can prevent people with disabilities from participating in travel, employment, and everyday life. With the right knowledge and a bit of effort, many of these barriers can be eliminated or minimized."

Jason's determination led him to the field of research. In 2001, Jason enrolled at Salem State University in Salem, Massachusetts to study what he loves – travel and tourism. After graduating, Jason along with his wife, Patty, moved to Canada in 2010 to complete a master's degree at the University of Waterloo in the Environmental Studies Tourism Policy and Planning program.

Recognizing the importance of accessibility for people with disabilities and its enormous potential economic impact on the tourism industry, he is currently auditing accessibility at five parks in southern Ontario and plans to make recommendations to improve accessibility particularly for people with limited mobility or who use wheelchairs.

For Stefania, the scholarship will advance the graduate student's already groundbreaking work. She is the first researcher to study auditory and visual processing in a rare group of patients - those who have had one eye surgically removed at a young age due to cancer.

She believes that people with a sensory deficit can be trained to adapt, which in turn will result in rich perceptual experiences and less stress on their remaining senses. Her research explores crossmodal plasticity - or how people with one eye adapt - and whether other senses are enhanced and thus compensate for the loss.

"There is evidence of cortical plasticity. People with one eye have enhanced senses as a form of compensation," says Stefania, who suffered a traumatic injury to her left eye as a child. "This gives researchers and medical practitioners useful information to teach people how to improve their lives. My life experiences and my knowledge of the importance of maintaining my seeing eye and complementary senses have driven me to advocate for vision research and the resulting clinical applications which will improve patients' lives."

Stefania plans to explore her findings further through the use of functional magnetic resonance imaging at York University and intends to pursue a doctoral program in Vision Science research. The scholarship will help her advance this area of research.

For Jason, through the scholarship and his ongoing support from family, friends and his wife, "I have every opportunity to achieve my goal of changing the world."

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About Toronto Rehabilitation Institute

One of North America's leading rehabilitation sciences centres, Toronto Rehabilitation Institute (Toronto Rehab) is revolutionizing rehabilitation by helping people overcome the challenges of disabling injury, illness or age related health conditions to live active, healthier, more independent lives through innovative patient care, groundbreaking research and interprofessional education. Toronto Rehab, along with Toronto Western, Toronto General and Princess Margaret Hospitals, is a member of the University Health Network and is affiliated with the University of Toronto. Visit us online: www.torontorehab.com or www.uhn.ca.

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