A SCHOLAR'S STORY

FLYING SCHOLARSHIPS FOR THE DISABLED

In April 2008 Debbie Grice was awarded a flying scholarship at the Goodwood Flying School by Flying Scholarships for the Disabled (FSD) and this is her story.

"My world had, over the last seven years, become small, painful and worst of all for me, 'safe'. As a disabled person, living with Ankylosing Spondylitis, Rheumatoid Arthritis and Myoclonic Vasculitis; I had to get used to constant pain, a less than beautiful gait and joints plus the visually disturbing, yet comedic, myoclonic episodes - which my husband now calls 'my body popping'. But what concerned me most of all was the 'safeness' that my life had now embodied. The NHS has been wonderful; I have four specialist consultants and three specialist nurses all striving to make my body a more comfortable one to live in.

However, as a naturally adventurous and ambitious person, my self-esteem and confidence were in a far worse state than any frazzled nerve endings I have. In January 2008 my GP asked me to start retaking my anti-depressants; from this I gathered I had lost the mischievous and fun elements from my personality. I was seeing so much of her, and what with the ubiquitous January blues, I now gather she desired to see a more upbeat and happy Debbie; she said she had been worried about me 'for a while now'. In 2008 all I had to look forward to was an application I had made to FSD after seeing an article about Emma Suddaby, a previous FSD graduate, in the Arthritis Research Campaign magazine. I left any form of hope on a back burner, as anyone with chronic illness will know, disappointment becomes a very good friend rather quickly.

Debbie in the cockpit of a Piper Warrior at Goodwood Flying School.

Much to my surprise, 2008 began to shape into something really quite extraordinary when in March I was invited to attend the FSD selection board at RAF Cranwell. For three days I had a ball, I loved meeting other disabled people, all with bodies that had let them down in some respect, be it through trauma or disease. Some of the people that I met at Cranwell have become wonderful friends, from other scholars and interviewees to the interviewers themselves.

Three days after my time at Cranwell, the lovely Sue Whitby rang and offered me a UK NPPL Scholarship at Goodwood Flying School. I could not believe it. Fifteen or more people had believed in me enough that they offered me a chance to prove to myself that I still had a useful brain and that any physical difficulties could be overcome. The most wonderful thing for me was that with flying I would have to come up to scratch and fly and learn as well as any healthy person; I had been offered the opportunity of my now disabled lifetime, a gauntlet had been thrown down.

I was matched up with another FSD scholar, Emrys Harries, comedy genius and now famed for his tea making skills. In our luxury accommodation, a cup of tea was made for me every day for a month. As soon as my hair dryer was switched on, there it was, it became very Pavlovian indeed! Our accommodation was amazing and beautifully appointed with what Emrys and I now refer to as, an East and West Wing – bedrooms and en-suites far enough away that any snoring or health care regimes would not disturb one another. The month of June was spent at Goodwood Flying School where we became part of the fixtures and fittings. Each and every instructor was supportive and compassionate. Yet, this was not a fluffy and soft experience – I had challenged myself to fly a Piper 28 Warrior solo before my time was up. To do this, I needed to learn quickly, listen hard and take constructive criticism. I love a challenge and after eighteen hours of flying I had done my first solo. I was welcomed back to the clubhouse by instructors, Emrys and friends that we both had made. A glass of champagne toasted not only mine, but Goodwood's success.

By the end of June, Emrys and I had thrown a little party at our accommodation as we both felt that we needed to show our appreciation to everyone at the aero club. Goodwood Flying School could not have done anything more for us both. The instructors at Goodwood know how much I enjoyed myself as I kept telling them 'I love flying' but they may never know about the inner and deeper part of my confidence and esteem, which had been strengthened and nurtured. My friends at home say that I am glowing – and I'm not even pregnant!

Debbie at RIAT receiving her certificate from HRH Prince Feisal of Jordan and her flying suit from ACM Sir Glenn Torpy, Chief of the Air Staff.

The Royal International Air Tattoo was the icing on the cake for me, meeting all of the other scholars and our panellists again. I felt so proud receiving my certificate from HRH Prince Feisal of Jordan and my flying suit from the Chief of the Air Staff, ACM Sir Glenn Torpy, with the Instructors of Goodwood Flying School looking on. My intention is to now gain my NPPL as I simply love flying. Thank you so much to FSD and Goodwood Flying School – they have given me such a wonderful reason to enjoy life again – I deeply and sincerely appreciate what they have done for me".

To apply for a scholarship or make a donation, please visit www.toreachforthesky.org.uk or write to the address detailed below.

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