

"I see something every single day that I've never seen before. So you have to be a problem solver."



Lisa Yates (BSc Kinesiology '06) has arrived five minutes early for her meeting at the university Tim Hortons. Some might take advantage of this break to simply sip tea and daydream, but Yates unzips her backpack, covers the table with textbooks and notes, and squeezes in a few precious minutes of extra studying. "I'm definitely a keener," she laughs. "I love what I do."

All that studying is about to come in handy. Nearing the end of a two-year residency in prosthetics, Yates faces her national certification exam this summer, and she's bracing herself for a demanding ordeal. "There's a six-hour written portion, and six-hours of oral exams, and six hours of practical exams. So it's a difficult exam."

Maybe so, but you can't escape the feeling that Yates is up for the challenge. When she talks about prosthetics, she leans forward in her chair, eyes ablaze, and the words tumble forth. This is a woman who has found her true calling.

Like many people, though, Yates found her destiny only through a long series of close calls and happy coincidences. She traces her fate back to a summer job as a swimming instructor when she was 17, right before starting university.

"I was originally signed up in the Faculty of Science," Yates recalls. "But a girl I worked with was in kinesiology, and she told me about the program." A week before classes started, Yates switched faculties.

Physical Education and Recreation proved a natural fit. "I'm a real people person, and I liked the idea of going into a small faculty, where you actually recognize people in your classes—which is not science!"

Yates loved her program, even though she wasn't quite sure where it would lead. "My sister was in pharmacy, so people would say, 'Oh, you're going to be a pharmacist!' But, when you say you're in kinesiology, nobody knows what that is." With no clear picture, Yates began to form one for herself. "I started saying that I was going to teach people how to walk again. I didn't know what, or how, but that's what I decided in my head that I wanted to do."

Yates gained particular inspiration from a course on human motor control, taught by Dave Collins. She ended up working for Collins in her spare time, and later for her practicum. "He loved coming to work so much every day," Yates marvels. "I knew that I wanted to find something that I loved to do, as much he loved the nervous system. I had to find something that I was completely passionate about."


Then, in the summer before her fourth year, Yates had an epiphany. "I worked as a waitress at a private golf club—Belvedere, near Sherwood Park. It just so happened that the club champion was an amputee. One day, he and I had a long conversation about his prostheses, and it was so interesting. So, I went and volunteered with his prosthetist. I remember leaving the prosthetist's office, and calling my mom, and saying, 'I found my career!'"

After graduating, Yates enrolled in the two-year prosthetics program at the British Columbia Institute of Technology (BCIT). "There were 11 people in my class, from all across Western Canada. We'd be at school for 12 hours a day, and then hang out together after school. I really made lifelong friends."

One of her BCIT instructors hooked Yates up with a summer job in Edmonton, at Northern Alberta Prosthetic and Orthotic Services. "Numerous times over the summer, they kept telling me, 'We're not hiring anyone, so don't get your hopes up.' But the following Christmas, before I finished my program, I went in and said, 'I really, really love working here. I don't know where I'll go if you don't hire me.' They hired me a couple of days later."

After nearly two years of residency, Yates still finds herself constantly challenged—and loving it. "I see something every single day that I've never seen before. So you have to be a problem solver."

Best of all, Yates knows she and her colleagues make a difference. "When a first-time amputee comes to us, they've had a series of bad things happen in their life. And then, when they see us, it's, 'Okay, now they're going to do something to make my life better.'"

"Every day, I get to go to work and help people do what they want to do." 

Lisa Yates changes amputees' lives with custom prosthetics

"Keener" finds her calling

by Scott Rollans