



Off to a great start

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MEDICAL LABORATORY TECHNOLOGIST Kylah Sorenson has got her career off to an excellent start by attaining a perfect GPA of 4.33, the highest mark in her graduating class at the College of New Caledonia in Prince George. Even more gratifying, she has been awarded a prestigious Governor General's bronze medal for academic achievement.

Sorenson, who graduated in February of this year, is now happily working as a Laboratory Technologist at the University Hospital of Northern British Columbia.

Sorenson had worked as a laboratory assistant at UHNBC for two years before deciding to return to school.

"My work had given me a good introduction to the lab technology field, but I wasn't quite fulfilled enough," she says. "I took blood for eight hours a day every day, which I enjoy, and still enjoy, but I was constantly curious as to what the results were and what they meant."

Sorenson continued working as a lab assistant part-time while attending the two-year full time program at CNC. "It was hard, because it was a very intensive course," she says.

Her outstanding performance and resulting medal came as a bit of a surprise, she says. Her perfect GPA - which means she achieved straight A-plusses - suggests an intensely ambitious, driven student, ready to sacrifice anything for her academic career. But Sorenson didn't quite fit that profile.

"I never studied past 10:00 at night and never for any crazy length of time. Sometimes before exams I'd get up early to study. Every exam I'd go into I'd feel nervous and scared and thinking I wouldn't do as well as anyone else going into it."

To some degree, her good marks reflect her enthusiasm for the program. "I knew it was what I wanted to do, so I was a lot more focused," she says.

Sorenson had always wanted to go into the medical field but didn't want to spend years of her life in academia. Previously, she'd spent three years studying science, with good but not spectacular marks, at Thompson Rivers University in Kamloops, but had quit before getting her Bachelor of Science.

"I didn't know what I was going to do with an undergraduate degree. I remember my molecular genetics teacher saying you're just qualified to flip burgers unless you go further, so there was no motivation to keep studying and paying exorbitant amounts of tuition."

Instead, she did some research into other possibilities and signed up for a distance education program to become a lab assistant. "Because of my science background, I was able to finish the program in eight weeks. I did it all on the couch, then completed a six-week practicum."

A career in lab technology has proven to be the ideal path for Sorenson.

"Being a laboratory technician is the best way I can think of to combine my love of science and biology. I love what I do every day. I'm trained in four out of five departments which I really like because the work is different in every department. I use huge million dollar instruments, I use microscopes, I have contact with patients because we also go collecting - I'm doing all sorts of things, so it's never boring," she says.

Sorenson likes to think that it was her dedication to excellence as a laboratory technician that led her to

achieve her perfect line-up of straight A-plusses: "When people at work ask me why it was so important for me to have that 4.33, I said it was because I had to make all the numbers look the same on the transcript. It wasn't my goal to begin with, but once it was happening I was determined that it would be uniform - that's what makes a good lab tech!" she says with a laugh.

Sorenson appreciates that her work is not only interesting but also extremely important. "One of the Canadian Society for Medical Laboratory Science slogans is 'without us, doctors would be guessing.' It's estimated that 80 to 85 per cent of doctors' decisions are based on lab results, so we're very motivated to give out accurate ones. What we do is an important part of saving lives."

She'd like to see a higher public profile for laboratory technicians. "Most people I talk to don't understand what we do, they say oh, you take blood, but that's almost a small part of what we do. There are five different departments and each is more complicated than you'd think. In transfusions, for instance, people can die if they don't receive blood that is compatible. In trauma, we are working with emergency life-threatening situations. In microbiology we don't just test to see if there is infection, we figure out what antibiotics are likely to work and make recommendations to doctors about treatment.

"I wish I'd known more about this field when I was in high school and making decisions about my future," she says.

It may have taken Sorenson a while to find out that laboratory technology was her ideal career choice, but once that happened, her trajectory has given her, her colleagues, her school and fellow HSA members something to be proud of. 

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