



CHRISTOPHER MURPHY

SUPERVISOR, SPECIALIZED TRANSIT SERVICES

LONDON TRANSIT COMMISSION

INTERVIEWED AND WRITTEN BY:

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When I met with Christopher Murphy, Supervisor of Specialized Transit Services for the London Transit Commission, it became very clear why I had been asked to meet and interview this particular person. Before me stood a friendly, outgoing individual who is legally blind and yet has become extremely successful and proficient in a management position. How, you may ask, does one who is legally blind function in such a capacity? Well, that is exactly what I was there to find out. What is it that allowed Chris Murphy the opportunity to realize his potential and become an active participant within society?

Chris spoke of the competitive anxiety and frustration that came with a disability that left him not fully blind, but without adequate vision to see without assistive technologies. When I asked Chris to describe himself, he used the

term "Distorted Low Vision Confidence", referring to the distortion between the optic nerve and the brain which creates a kind of "underwater effect". The condition is not so severe for Chris to have a cane, so there are no visual cues that there may be limitations; and as such, Chris finds himself constantly explaining: "People assume the worst... that you're drunk or stoned". Chris confessed that it took a long time before he could really feel self-confident. Developing a career was a major part of that process, but having a family Chris can love and support, and a wife & daughter that are extraordinarily compassionate has changed the way he perceives himself and the world around him.

The key to Chris' success comes from a few places. The first of which is his parents' strong supportive role and unwillingness to

support the 'poor Chris' mentality. The situation was looked upon as an obstacle to overcome: how are we going to deal with this? It was with this attitude that Chris's journey began. Interestingly, Chris' teachers did not discover the root of the issue until he had mentioned to his mother that the "chalk looked invisible". Schools had been using black chalkboards with white chalk (high-contrast), but had begun using green chalkboards with yellow chalk (low contrast). The contrast between the colours meant that Chris was not able to see anything that was written on the board. Steps were then taken to move Chris to the front of the classroom. Sometimes he would have to stand to read the board, singling himself out and wavering his confidence amongst his peers. Contrast and lighting was acknowledged to be a significant barrier to achievement.

The introduction of a monocular glass to help see the chalkboard was a revelation that brought words closer than ever to his world. It gave Chris a visual perspective that his peers took for granted. It was also a gateway into another realm; for the first time ever realizing to what extent the eyes of the sighted could actually see.

When Chris progressed through grades one through four, the competitive anxiety was increasing and he soon realized that he had to be just as good as the other children, or better, to be valued as an equal. In this moment, he realized that there are "no stupid questions", and that he had to become empowered to achieve the things he wanted to do. Asking questions meant to risk appearing the fool. Chris had acknowledged the need to adapt and accept his condition in order to succeed, indicating that positive attitude and an open-minded perspective are imperative to this process.

Although Chris had the option of attending special educational institutions, his parents believed that Chris was bright and

deserved the same experiences and opportunities as anyone else. With this, it was decided that Chris was to remain in the mainstream school system to complete his education.

At age seven, Chris' father suggested that he play hockey. Chris had learned how to skate at a young age and quickly took to the idea. Adapting his condition to the situation meant that Chris had to skate faster than everyone else. Unable to see the puck, Chris learned to sense through movement. Rapid movement meant that the puck was close. He had to skate faster than other players so that he could get close enough to the puck to see it.

Classic old school hockey habits were instilled by Chris's father, Joseph, with post game comments on what strengths and weaknesses were displayed. "Use your size and speed. Play physical and skate like hell with the puck when you see an opening!", Joseph would say. After major midget level of hockey the game had caught up to Chris. "Looking back at the days of struggling to see the puck in the corner or block a booming slap shot from the blue line, being a Toronto Maple Leafs fan since 1967 has proven more frustrating than any visual disability", Chris jokes.

Having grown up in a rural setting just outside of Byron, Chris was familiar with a good work ethic, as he was on his own a lot as a child. He had bailed hay and performed various other tasks around the farm. Chris's first job was as a dishwasher. The position was described as fairly easy, cleaning by touch, and loading the dishwashing machines; but it wasn't challenging or interesting, and Chris knew that he wanted more.

For a time, Chris worked at a car garage. Ambitious and young, at age 17, Chris was hired on and eventually asked to move cars. Chris knew that he would not be able to obtain a

driver's licence, and as such, his time at the garage was short-lived. In an effort to be seen as an equal, Chris had tried to hide the fact that he was legally blind and attempted to do his job as best as he could without full disclosure. The situation grew to a point where he was unable to go any further without possessing a driver's licence, and once again, Chris moved on to something else.

There was much frustration, anger, and anxiety as Chris' peers and friends moved on to increasingly better job opportunities, while Chris struggled just to keep up. Chris then found a position working at a hockey arena for a period of time, but became bored with that, as well. It had become clear to him that he needed to focus more on skills that utilized his mental strengths, as opposed to the physical ones. This realization was a blow to his self-confidence, as gender carries with it certain personal expectations. For Chris, not being able to drive a car, play hockey and other things of that nature meant that his identity as a man was at stake as well.

Chris attended the University of Western Ontario and made it a point to be the best student he could be by recording all lectures and reviewing them. Chris quickly discovered that this was a time-consuming process and found he was unable to keep up with the workload. A tape recorder simply wasn't enough to accomplish the goals he had set out for himself. Shortly thereafter, Chris was referred to ATN Access Inc.

At ATN, Chris was able to access the technology and understanding to successfully move towards his goals. Chris describes ATN as "a breath of educational fresh air", "...a place that understands". He went on to say that he no longer had to explain his condition and what his needs were. ATN was an agency that knew what it meant to be legally blind and which tools and technologies would be needed to give Chris the supports he needed to find a successful, fulfilling

career. At age 27, Chris began his studies with the centre. At ATN, Chris had access to assistive technology programs such as ZoomText, a powerful access solution tool for the visually impaired. It consists of two adaptive technologies – screen magnification and screen reading, allowing for the ability to see and hear everything on the computer screen, providing complete access to applications, documents, email, and the internet. Chris also used a program called LP Dos, which displays clear and natural looking large print when magnifying text-based programs. Although technologies were more limited at the time Chris was attending ATN, access to these software and hardware tools were key to his success. He learned to function efficiently, instead of constantly having to do three times the work to remain part of the status quo. As part of the math curriculum, Chris worked with an instructor who didn't believe in boundaries and was willing to teach each student as much as they were able and willing to learn. Chris found this inspiring and went on to learn algebra and basic physics.



Chris uses ZoomText magnifier to help him look after the small details of management.

In 1995, ATN assisted with employment seeking strategies and Chris had found a part-time customer service position at the London Transit Commission (LTC). Chris explained his pleasant amazement at how accommodating people were. By acknowledging the visual impairment as a difference in functioning, as

opposed to a weakness, Chris was provided the tools he needed and was able to become increasingly proficient, although he still does things in a way that is unique. While some people could simply refer to a bus schedule to provide information to the public, Chris learned and memorized the majority of the main routes, having only to refer to the uncommon ones. Chris was extremely competent and was excelling in the customer service position and went on to fulfill roles within LTC's Treasury Department, and gain full-time employment as a Para-transit dispatcher.



Chris and his team: from left to right, Chris-Dave-Lisa-Rebekah

In 2001, Chris Murphy was promoted to Supervisor of Specialized Transit Services for the LTC. He currently works closely with his staff and utilizes assistive technologies introduced by

ATN. Chris confessed that for the first time in his life he feels a sense of pride. Feelings of competitive anxiety have been replaced with a sense of self-confidence and well-being. Chris explained that working with ATN had "softened a lot of bitterness towards education" and relieved feelings of "constant struggle". He goes so far as to describe ATN as "an educational defibrillator", rekindling his ambition, his drive to dream, and to accomplish things he had thought were always going to be just beyond his reach.

On March 2, 1996, Chris Murphy became an elected member of ATN's Board of Directors, having come full circle and feeling compelled to give back to an agency that had helped him accomplish so much. In 2010 Chris was elected as Board Chair and continues to serve the Board and his community through 2011.

If we look back over Chris' life from where he began to where he is now, Chris' story is truly one of struggle, determination and perseverance. It goes to show that opportunity cannot be standardized. Understanding the differences that make people unique allows us to draw upon human capital from all segments of society, in spite of our differences. For ATN, Christopher Murphy's story is proof of what could be when inclusion and accessibility become the backbone of our social efforts.