

## WHAT CANCER PATIENT LOUANN POIRIER LEARNED FROM STUDYING WITH ATHABASCA UNIVERSITY

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Describing her studies with Athabasca University, Louann Poirier (BPA: Human Services, 2014) says, "I was the butterfly gleaming the knowledge in my courses." Now, as she copes with terminal cancer, she continues to draw inspiration from butterflies, as you'll see in her poem at the end of this article.

When Louann Poirier's cancer came back in 2014, she was told she had only a few months to live. She had been diligently working away at a human services degree from Athabasca University for over a decade, but now she feared she might not have time to finish it. And it was a dream she very much wanted to see through to the end.

Louann Poirier on graduation day with Dr. Jane Arscott, associate professor of human services. Louann explained her situation to Dr. Jane Arscott, an associate professor of human services at AU, and Jane arranged for Louann to receive her degree on Oct. 23, 2014. Jane travelled to Louann's home in McBride, B.C., and personally conferred the degree to Louann. Following are Louann's graduation speech and Jane's recollections of teaching and visiting Louann, who is an honours student, world traveller and mental health worker who spent years in Vancouver's downtown eastside helping mentally ill drug addicts. At the time of this article being published (December 2014), Louann is waiting to undergo chemotherapy.

### Jane's Recollections of Louann

Edited excerpts from Jane's account of teaching Louann and visiting her in McBride to confer her degree. Louann took her first AU class, The Inuit Way, in 1990. When the Bachelor of Professional



### Louann Poirier on graduation day with Dr. Jane Arscott, associate professor of human services.

Arts in Human Services became available, she gained admission to the program in 2002 using block credit transfer from a one-year certificate in community mental health. The Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) process at AU drew on her learning from 19 years in the field of mental health and gained her entry to the

senior-level coursework for the Bachelor of Professional Arts.



Completing a course per year, she fit her studies around 16 trips to India and other sojourns to Vietnam, Nepal and Thailand with her husband Denis. Her love of travelling had been fuelled by time she spent teaching English as a second language in Indonesia and Japan. She recalled leaving one dog-eared course package in rural India after receiving word that she had completed the course successfully.

For Louann's project in Human Services (HSRV) 421: Advocacy from the Margins, she co-created a blog, *Shelved Skeletons*, named by her clients in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside with whom she worked as a harm reduction counsellor for nearly 11 years. The blog is no longer up, but it did continue for several years after she completed the course.

In 2004, she was diagnosed with cancer and took a break from her studies. Healthy again in 2005, Louann continued her coursework with renewed enthusiasm. When she experienced a recurring infection in 2011, she decided to settle for the Bachelor of General Studies in order to focus on her health. That option didn't work out, so she remained in the Bachelor of Professional Arts. Following a diagnosis of terminal cancer in September 2014, her dream of completing her degree became urgent. When she contacted me to see what might be possible, she was just a few credits and one exam short of reaching her goal.

Visiting Louann to confer her degree

Louann Poirier graduated with distinction.

When I met Louann in her hometown of McBride, population 500, the afternoon before the ceremony, our mutual love of learning established an immediate rapport. I apologized for having had the first students in the program, including her, write 10 essays to ensure they covered all the material — now there are just three. I also had to ask about the one C on her transcript, worried that I might have been the "hard marker." She explained she had been undergoing treatment for cancer at the time, which interfered with her usual diligence. The next morning, gowned and hooded, I read the graduation petition and pledge to Louann in front of a small group of her family and friends, and Louann made the graduand's promise to be loyal and bring honour to the university. When she kissed the parchment and smiled broadly for the camera, her dream been realized.

Athabasca University makes a difference in the lives of our students and also in the many other lives the students' lives touch. Facilitating Louann's degree completion has been a highlight of my years of teaching and coordinating academic programs at AU. Thanks, Lou, for sharing your educational journey with the AU community. Your determination, your perseverance, and your equanimity affirm your personal philosophy.



Edited excerpts from Louann's graduation speech, which concludes with her poem "Butterfly Ditty."

I see my studies at Athabasca University over the years as a metamorphosis experience, a

transformation that gave me the ability to see myself and others as splendid beings with strengths. Louann's "Butterfly Ditty"

I was the butterfly gleaning the knowledge in my courses and then taking it back to the Downtown Eastside of Vancouver where I worked with mentally ill drug addicts. The courses in health, criminal justice, women and gender studies and human services broadened my understanding of the people I was serving, and it helped me take that knowledge to new levels, especially in harm reduction and in facilitating groups. It gave me the chance to research and implement interventions to help people have options rather than die on the streets from overdose.

Today I am meeting another experience in my life, that of a terminal illness. I will be viewing it as another adventure with a meaningful outcome, which I'd like to express now with a Butterfly Ditty:



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## **BUTTERFLY DITTY**

**I will flit  
through the clouds  
of my soul  
discover the things  
that unsettle me  
secure in not knowing everything**

**growing from a spindly cocoon  
to the splendid being I am  
pretty colorful wings  
filled with energy and peace**

**having everything  
I want and need  
loved sheltered  
by the golden firmament  
the world is my home  
happy free  
full of devotion  
my wings can take  
the winds and storms**

**Louann POIRIER**

## Some Comments for Her

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1. **Mark Crawford (@markc007) says**  
**December 19, 2014 at 3:58 pm**

**Congratulations, Louann. This is really an inspirational story— it shows how distance learning and PLAR can work for students— and how a student can be a truly great reflection upon AU.**

### **Reply**

2. **Suzanne says**  
**December 21, 2014 at 5:37 am**

**Congratulations Louann! May you continue your metamorphosis with splendor and strength and be surrounded by love always.**

### **Reply**

3. **Carolyn Hill says**  
**December 21, 2014 at 7:42 am**

**Louann, your story is an inspiration to those of us who get overwhelmed juggling full-time career, family and life struggles. I am working on my degree at the pace of one per year which at times feels it will take a life time to achieve. Thank you so much for sharing your story and CONGRATULATIONS .... you did it!!**