

Profiles in

By Phyllis Porter '97

Despite Illness, This Student Pushes On

Two weeks before the semester started last fall, Jan Skelton was hospitalized for a streptococcus infection in her heart. The 51-year-old Brodbeck Scholar is vivacious and outspoken with a will of iron. Determined to start school on time, she talked her doctors into dismissing her from the hospital early.

"I think they just got sick of hearing me complain," she says with a hearty laugh.

With the aid of what she calls her fashion statement—a device that pumps antibiotics directly into her heart—Jan started classes on time. But unfortunately, her health problems were not over.

After a few days back in school, she was back in the hospital. This time, a piece of debris from her aortic valve had detached, causing a blockage in her left leg. She spent nine days in intensive care.

Although she recovered from this episode, her doctors warned her that she could have a recurrence without heart valve replacement. Not one to stay idle for long, Jan returned to school three days after she was released from the hospital.

"Playing catch up has been a hassle, but it's been worth it," Jan says. "Education is the driving force in my life right now; everything else comes second."

The road to higher learning has not been an easy one. In 1992, she spent seven months in Springfield Hospital Center in Sykesville, Md. A victim of incest, she was treated for clinical depression and post-traumatic stress syndrome. During her stay, the Maryland Department of Vocational Rehabilitation recognized her potential and offered her the opportunity to go to college.

"I knew I wanted to attend Hood even while I was still in Springfield Hospital," Jan recalls. "They used to bring us to Frederick to use the Hood pool once a week. I loved the campus and I was aware of Hood's fine academic standing. I spent many a Tuesday afternoon

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lingering by the pool, dreaming of becoming a Hood student someday."

After her release from Springfield Hospital, Jan spent another five months in transitional housing in Baltimore, Md.

"I was the only one there who wasn't a prostitute, junkie, or alcoholic, or had not come straight from jail. It was a miserable existence. It was the only time in my life I have ever been lonesome."

Still, she persevered in her aspiration to attend Hood. Soon after her release from transitional housing, she applied and was accepted. However, she took her Hood counselor's advice to start her studies at Frederick Community College (FCC) in Frederick, Md., to see how she would adjust to college life.

She moved to Frederick with little more than the clothes on her back. During her first year as a student, she survived on food stamps and lived in an apartment provided by a homeless advocacy agency.

Jan proudly received an associate of arts degree from FCC in fall 1995. The following spring, she realized her dream and enrolled at Hood. She won a Beneficial-Hodson Scholarship based on her academic achievements.

The same optimism that enabled her to overcome mental illness and poverty now helps her cope with physical ailments. She is determined to finish her undergraduate work and a master's degree in history.

Her goal is to teach history in an Eskimo community for several years, and then to teach on an Indian reservation.

"Teaching people who often lack the opportunity for an education is my way of repaying society for the gifts I've been given. If I can inspire in one child the same love of history I have, then my life will have been worth something."

On January 29, Jan Skelton had successful heart valve replacement surgery. After a leave of absence during the spring semester, she plans to resume classes in the fall.