

## **BEING THE SUPPORTER, NOT THE SUPPORTED**

By Lana Phillips

Since I was eighteen years old, all I've wanted to do is find a way to help people. I worked hard in school to get a degree, and have struggled to find a place where my limitations didn't prevent me from "being all that I can be," as the US Army commercials call us to do. I got involved in disability advocacy on a volunteer basis through the Alberta Disabilities Forum and the City of Edmonton's Advisory Board on Services for Persons with Disabilities. This involvement reminded me that my kind of disability (mobility) wasn't the only kind that limited people's ability to fully participate in the life of the community. I worked hard, soaked up all the knowledge I could, and met as many people as I could who were chasing the same dream I am—accessibility for all. Yet something was missing. I knew people with hearing and sight impairments, people using wheelchairs, people with psychiatric disabilities—but I couldn't think of ANYONE I knew with a developmental disability. I did some Internet research about the kinds of work being done to support them, and found an agency in Edmonton (SKILLS) that had a heart for this kind of work and the people they support. I started at a different place than the people who talked about community inclusion, but didn't have to worry about being included because they didn't face the same barriers. I knew disability as more than "textbook"—it was and is my life. My disability is not the same as theirs, but there is common ground that I try to seek out every day. The agency I work with is supportive and makes all the accommodations it can to help me succeed in my position because they value ALL my experience. If you're feeling that your disability and its limitations are nothing but a burden, find a place—ANY PLACE—that values what you know and how you've learned to live your life. People need you to walk beside them and help them build bridges to others who can support them. People need you to tell your story so that those in power can hear it and make changes that will benefit others with disabilities. Give a bit of yourself—you'll get so much more in return than you lose.