



MCC's accessibility services helped alumnus Andy Weller overcome classroom barriers to be successful in his college coursework.

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– Andy Weller

RESOURCES WELLER USED:

Bookshare is an accessible online library for people with print disabilities. Visit www.bookshare.org/cms for more information.

Job Access With Speech (JAWS) is a screen reading software program for your computer. Visit www.freedomscientific.com/Products/Blindness/JAWS for more information.

Victor Reader Stream is a handheld media player for the blind and visually impaired. Visit www.humanware.com/en-usa/products/blindness/dtb_players/compact_models for more information.

Richard “Andy” WELLER

MCC alumnus overcomes educational barriers

Richard “Andy” Weller overcame barriers at Montcalm Community College to become one step closer to his dream job.

Weller has retinitis pigmentosa (RP), which is a genetic eye disease wherein the back wall of the eye – the retina – is damaged, degenerates over time and leads to vision loss.

“When I was eight, I went to Michigan State University to have my eyes tested and they diagnosed me,” Weller said. “By 25, I lost my driver’s license because my sight got that bad.”

Weller said smoking and exposure to direct sunlight speeds the progression of RP.

“I started smoking when I was 18 and stopped when I was 31. I have not noticed much of a loss since then,” the 40-year-old said.

“I regret smoking, but losing my sight also gave me a lot,” he added. “Before I lost my sight, I was working in a factory and not very happy just paying the bills. Now I have two degrees and live in Louisiana, which I probably would have never done if I was still sighted.”

Weller enrolled in classes at MCC in 2008. He said the college’s accessibility services aided him in his success. (See related accessibility services story on page 12.)

“Asking for help first is the key to overcoming any barrier,” he said. “Being on campus was hard at first because I wasn’t familiar with the layout.

I had to ask people to guide me until I figured out where buildings, sidewalks and doors were.”

When Weller got into the classroom, he utilized technology to overcome the barrier of being blind.

“Most books are audio accessible if you know where to look,” he said. “I used Bookshare, JAWS and Victor Reader Stream to listen to books. I also recorded class lectures so I could go over my notes at home, and I had to find people to read tests to me.”

Weller said MCC Director of Student Success & Advising Lisa Gardner went beyond what she had to do to help him be successful in and out of the classroom.

“When a book required for class wasn’t available on any of those services, Lisa, her husband, Brian, or another person would read the chapters out loud, record it and give me the recording.

“My entire experience at MCC was very awesome,” he added. “I didn’t run into anyone I didn’t like. Classmates, teachers – everybody was so helpful.”

Weller has enjoyed the long road to living in Lafayette, La. After graduating from Portland High School in 1996, he started working in a factory and attended Lansing Community College to pursue an automotive service technician degree. Seven years later, he lost his sight and driver’s license, and had to leave the

factory because it wasn’t a safe place for him to work anymore.

“When I decided to go back to school to find something I would be able to do, I went to Everest College and graduated with a degree in massage therapy, which I did for a couple years. Then I knew I really needed to do some career counseling to find my likes and dislikes, and what fields would be open to me,” Weller said.

That’s when he decided to return to college again and enrolled at MCC.

In 2011, Weller transferred to Western Michigan University where he earned a bachelor’s degree in interpersonal communication with a minor in recreation in 2015.

Weller is now on his way to becoming a vision rehabilitation therapist.

“I’ll teach blind and visually impaired people to be independent,” he said. “I learned first-hand how technology is important for daily tasks such as cooking, cleaning and organizing, and I want to share my knowledge and experience.”

He is currently pursuing a National Certification in Unified English Braille through the National Blindness Professional Certification Board to learn and teach braille. He will then pursue a master’s degree, possibly at Louisiana Tech University Professional Development and Research Institute on Blindness, to prepare for his career as a vision rehabilitation therapist.