

Brain tumor, hard work, now Yale — and beyond

Frances Fagan, who has spent a lot of time in waiting rooms at social services agencies, aims to transform similar spaces into therapeutic environments.

BY SUE ZALOKAR
STAFF WRITER

Frances Fagan isn't the average student, but she is paving the way for the average student to reach success.

Born in Hood River, Fagan grew up in a rural community across the river in White Salmon, Wash. She will tell you that she grew up in a family that encouraged autonomy and, for many years, in a household that had no running water or electricity. Some call it a bohemian lifestyle. Fagan says it was more like "rainbow gathering hippies." Whatever the case, next month, Fagan will pack up her life (and her cat) and move to New Haven, Conn. Once there, she will begin her study, on a full scholarship, at Yale University with a focus on studying ethnicity, race and migration.

The remarkable thing about Fagan isn't that she got into an Ivy League school. It is that through using a supportive academic network and by staying obsessively focused on her goals and hours of tutoring, in two years Fagan went from a fifth-grade math level to a full-ride scholarship to Yale.

But while she says she is overwhelmingly grateful to be headed to such a well-respected school, it is simply a step on the road to a larger goal. Fagan wants to work for the United Nations as an adviser on the design of refugee camps.

It is no accident that the enterprising woman has an interest in supportive, therapeutic environments. In 2005, Fagan suffered a seizure caused by a brain tumor in her left frontal lobe. The seizure and the surgery to remove the tumor left her paralyzed on half of her body, with years of recovery ahead. Suddenly, this self-sufficient woman was dependent on a supportive community, unable to drive because of the risk of continued seizure, and spent countless hours sitting in public spaces: traveling by bus and idling in social service agencies' waiting rooms. She had a lot of time to watch these spaces, how diverse groups of people used them and how the spaces were limiting. She also had a lot of time to think about how to make these spaces more welcoming.

The story of Frances Fagan isn't one about a woman who worked hard to overcome a brain tumor to go to Yale. It is the story of a woman who is blazing the way so that others might follow.

Frances Fagan: In 2013, I began a two-year process that led me to here. But a couple of years after high school, I actually enrolled in some classes in the wintertime, thinking it would be fun to take some art classes and take a philosophy class. But I didn't have a focus. And I didn't have a plan, and I didn't seek out any guidance counseling or help like that.

When it started snowing, halfway through the winter season, I just kind of wandered away. I had no attachments. I hadn't reached out to any communities in the school or organizations, clubs or guidance counselors, and so there was nothing anchoring me to



PHOTO BY DIEGO DIAZ

Frances Fagan is about to begin school at Yale to study ethnicity, race and migration, with a passion for helping refugees.

PCC. It was easy for me to wander away. I think that is a problem a lot of people face — either first-timers or people returning to school — they don't find any anchor points or connections within their campus and so they are kind of just adrift.

Sue Zalokar: How did you stay "anchored" this time around?

F.F.: The Transitions Program gave me that. It gave me a community. It's a one-term program for nontraditional students, and it gives you an automatic cohort of other people from diverse backgrounds. There are all kinds of ages and skill levels. People are coming from all kinds of transitional points in their life. It's a bunch of relatable misfits, in a way.

S.Z.: You've said that as a child, your family moved around a lot. As a teacher, I have seen how this can affect students' skill and confidence. How did this affect your understanding of formal schooling?

F.F.: It made it extremely difficult for me to appreciate formal school because some years, I would go to two schools in the same year. Each school is working on different topics at different times.

I learned how to be really adaptable socially, which has helped me, but academically, I never really had any foundation. I never developed any kind of lasting relationship with any school or with any extracurricular program.

S.Z.: Then June 2005 happened: You

suffered a major seizure in Southeast Portland right outside of your home. You were diagnosed with a brain tumor in your left frontal lobe. The recovery from surgery left you paralyzed on one side of your body. Recovery took three years. You've said you were pretty fiercely independent before the surgery. What was it like to become dependent on a support network, made up largely of people you didn't know?

F.F.: It was extremely humbling. And very disorienting. After that initial (surgery), because of the scar tissue in my head, I started having seizures pretty constantly, which is disorienting.

I couldn't work, and I had worked since I was 15. The process of applying for disability was exhausting. Especially because my mental capacity had been totally messed with, and then I was having seizures constantly.

I was initially on some pretty intense seizure medication like phenobarbital. Anyone that takes such intense medications knows that it's kind of like moving through a fog. And so to be asked to do a lot of complicated paperwork and to go to different offices around town (was difficult).

If you need the resources, you have to be extremely diligent. It is common that you're denied Social Security benefits; you are denied off the bat. I actually had to hire an attorney.

S.Z.: You were denied?

F.F.: Yes. I was. Like many people. I was housed, but I heard of people that were living in their car and having intense

problems who were also denied.

S.Z.: Advocating for yourself at this time couldn't have been very easy.

F.F.: If you want to have access to the resources that you need, even though we are one of the richest countries in the world, you have to get lucky. I had a good attorney, but I still had to be super adamant and make calls to (move things forward). Granted, there are wonderful people in the (Supplemental Security Income) program, but the process is exhausting and basically set up for people to fail.

I think you are being punished for being vulnerable. You're on hold for hours on the phone. There is a constant stream of paperwork that you have to stay on top of. ... I was going from a radiation appointment to getting right back onto a TriMet bus and riding over to Powell Boulevard and waiting for a couple of hours to see if I could get food benefits.

Ultimately, after I was denied, I had to move out of my apartment in Southeast and move up to live with my grandparents (in Hood River). My case was eventually approved, and I was able to move back to Portland and be near the resources that I needed.

S.Z.: You've been in remission for 10 years now. Do you have any lingering anxiety about that experience?

F.F.: Absolutely. I'm still really

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