



## One Year at a Time

by Chris Cannon

**R**UMANA MONZUR has completed law school with much more than a JD degree. After surviving a brutal attack in her native Bangladesh which left her blind for life, her decision to go to law school while learning to live without sight was itself a study in patience—with a steep learning curve. But her persistence and passion remain unabated

four years later. With an expanded horizon of interests and a new outlook on life, Monzur has hardly slowed down.

Originally planning to pursue a PhD in environmental security, Monzur shifted from an academic path to the JD program after her experience in a difficult legal struggle as a victim of domestic violence and because she realized that a legal education would provide one of the best foundations for advancing her environmental advocacy interests.

Monzur came to UBC from the University of Dhaka, where she was serving as an assistant professor after graduating from the school with a BA and MA in International Relations. She was pursuing a second Master's degree in Political Science at UBC when she decided to return home in 2011 to visit her husband and five-year-old daughter, before finishing her graduate thesis.

The trip would change her life. Her husband did not want her to return to school,

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and in a scene all too common in Bangladesh, where domestic violence against women is a pervasive crime, he viciously beat and maimed her, biting off her nose and blinding her in both eyes. Monzur thought that her academic life was over, and worried how she would support her daughter. She was 33, and she was terrified.

But her school and her fellow students did not forget her. UBC arranged for her to return to Vancouver to see a specialist, and her classmates and members of the local community raised enough funds to bring Monzur, her parents, and her daughter back to UBC to complete her studies, where the University pledged to support them for the next six months. Eventually they would all receive permanent resident status on humanitarian grounds.

Monzur's challenge was far from over. After four surgeries, doctors determined they would not be able to restore her vision, and she would be embarking on a new academic path without the skills that take sightless people years to achieve. Too busy with her studies to learn Braille, Monzur dove head-first into new territory, buoyed by the overwhelming support of the law school and her classmates.

"I had never studied as a blind student, so it was different for me, the demands and needs were different," she says. "I could not function as every other blind student would be able to function. So I needed a lot of help, even to access the readings, and even to go to classes."

The UBC Access & Diversity office in Student Services helped her navigate this difficult first year—making sure she got to class and back home, providing her with assistance taking notes in class, and working with Allard School of Law staff to design workable exam accommodations. Volunteer readers translated her study materials to audio formats that she could review before class. "I will never forget those days that

changed my life," she says, "but at the same time—and I've said it before—I may have lost two eyes, but it made me feel that I have gained thousands of them."

One of her most difficult challenges was doing research through the school's legal database, a complicated system that required her to work with a library assistant. But day by day, she adapted to her new surroundings, training herself to operate a voice recorder by touch and learning a program that allows the blind to operate computers. With every small victory came a shot of confidence, but she still had to pace herself.

"I became more patient for sure," she says. "I had to accept the fact that I needed more time. I couldn't maintain my previous speed. I guess it was a compromise that I had to make, accepting that I would be able to do these things, but I would have to do them a different way. Even accepting that was a huge thing for me."

Slower, maybe, but hardly by much it would seem. Her second year brought two articling offers—one with the Department of Justice and the other with the private international firm DLA Piper (Canada) LLP in Vancouver, with whom she also worked during the summer—even as she expanded her extracurricular activities. In 2015, she gave a TEDx lecture about violence against women, soon followed by talks about disability rights, workplace diversity and the importance of girls' education. Eventually she


would begin writing a book and participating in a documentary about her experience.

Her daughter, now 11, continues to be her first priority, and has adjusted well to life in Canada.

"I'm cherry-picking now because I don't have much time," she says, "but I do want to be more involved in advocacy. That's a passion, and I don't want to leave my passion because of my professional life."

As her law career begins to take shape, Monzur is still unsure of which direction she wants to go. "It's still a question I'm trying to find an answer to," she laughs. "At first, everyone thought I would be more interested in social justice issues, and I am, but I also don't want to get rid of my interest in environmental law and human security just because something happened to me, so I'm interested in environmental law and in Aboriginal law and other areas. There are so many different areas that I didn't even know about until I started law school."

She ultimately accepted the offer from DLA Piper, and will be joining them this fall to complete her articling. She hopes to take her bar exam next May, but she's more careful about making plans than she used to be.

"After what happened to me, I just take one year at a time." 

*Rumana was the 2016 recipient of the Hilda Janzen Memorial Award in Feminist Legal Studies which is generously supported by Sonya Wall.*

