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## Proud graduate overcame brain injury

**After massive damage caused in car accident, York program assists woman to get degree**

Oct 21, 2008 04:30 AM

[Comments on this story](#) (6)**SHABNAM JANET JANANI**  
STAFF REPORTER

After Rosanne Wong was in a horrific car accident 11 years ago, doctors said her brain was so badly damaged she would not be able to do anything for the rest of her life.

She was, according to them, in a persistent vegetative state.

Saturday, Wong stood on a podium at York University wearing a flowing black gown as she graduated with a B.A. in sociology. Her remarkable achievement was made possible with the help of York's Office for Persons with Disabilities.

"I never give up," said the 29-year-old east Toronto woman in a phone interview, her speech still slowed by the effects of the brain injury she suffered while living in Apopka, Fla.

Wong had just received a full scholarship from the University of Florida and dreamed of becoming a computer engineer.

Then, on Sept. 19, 1997, she was driving on her way to tutor underprivileged students when she made a wrong turn, into the path of a 16-wheel tractor-trailer.

Wong spent 10 days in a coma at the Orlando Regional Medical Centre in Florida.

Over the course of nine months, despite what doctors had said, she began to regain basic functions. She slowly started to breathe, eat, talk and walk on her own. She was released from the hospital, but it would be two years before her brain could do more complex things.

"Gradually, her ability to read came back," said her father, Ray Wong, "but she had to read a page more than 10 times to remember details."

As her insurance coverage ran out – and the company refused to renew her policy – bills for her medication that reached \$6,000 a month prompted her family to return to Canada, where they had moved from Jamaica 30 years earlier.

She enrolled in York University's Information Technology program in 2001, still hoping to become a computer engineer.

"When disabled students register at the university, they meet with case counsellors first," said Karen Swartz, director at the Office for Persons with Disabilities at York. Case counsellors review the students' difficulties and then build a plan based on what kind of accommodations they need to proceed through their university career.

In the 2007-2008 academic year, 2,533 students were accommodated for their disabilities at York. Of these, about 50 had brain injuries, Schwartz said.

Students with disabilities are usually expected to write the same exams and assignments as other students.

After Wong failed courses in the Information Technology program, a neuropsychology assessment suggested that parts of her brain that process information related to math and science had been



KEITH BEATY/TORONTO STAR  
Rosanne Wong receives her degree Oct. 18, 2008 at York University from Chancellor Roy McMurtry. She graduated with a B.A. in sociology.

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destroyed along with her short-term memory. That indicated she should change her major.

"She is very hard working and dedicated," said Annette Symanzik, a case counsellor at York.

But before her transition, Wong faced another shock when her mother died from a heart attack.

"She was so close to her mother and was so depressed that she wasn't able to do things properly," said her father.

She received therapy and was eventually able to recover from the grief. "It was a big loss for me," she said. "My mother really wanted to see my graduation day."

Wong is independent now, and looks forward to starting a job in her field.

As for the doctor who told Wong's father his daughter would never do anything for the rest of her life, he is still annoyed but said, "We let it go."

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#### Do the math before you make ignorant comments

It cost taxpayers \$6,000 a month to help Rosie -- that's \$72,000 per year for 3 years -- \$216,000 in total. Compare this with the cost of keeping her in hospital for the rest of her life, which would have been in excess of 100 million. Rosie's determination has saved taxpayers millions!

Submitted By Lillie Papps at 9:58 AM Wednesday, October 22 2008

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#### Rosie, YOU ROCK!

You've certainly received more than your fair share of adversity, but you didn't let it halt your goals and ambitions, and for that, I applaud you! Too often we gripe about the speedbumps in life, and we never realize how minor they are in comparison to what other people have to deal with. "That which is beautiful and striking is not always good, but that which is good is always beautiful." As for Cynthia's comments, SHAME ON YOU if you think your tax dollars are wasted on supporting someone like Rosie. She is not only an inspiration, but an asset to society, and that is more than I can say for the murders and child molesters "your tax dollars" are paying to feed and house in prison.

Submitted By taintedtiara at 1:16 AM Wednesday, October 22 2008

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#### Thanks Rosanne

Your story touched me on a very personal level, as I have been affected by a brain injury in many similar ways. As it has been 11 years post injury for you, and my injury was relatively more recent, it gives me some hope that indeed, with hard work and motivation, I will also be able to graduate from post-secondary education, and do what I want to do. Thanks for the inspiration.

Submitted By i. at 10:46 PM Tuesday, October 21 2008

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#### Cynthia, you've missed the point.

Cynthia, I am a bit confused as to the relevance of your comment. I find it rather offensive and irrelevant. This story speaks to Rosanne's personal triumph in the face of adversity; not her or her family's patriotism. The healthcare system in Canada does not dictate that you are not allowed to return home to utilise the privileges of being a Canadian. Cynthia, it is a shame that you have missed the morale of this story -NEVER GIVE UP. Good for you Rosanne, you are truly an inspiration.

Submitted By L.Ainsworth at 10:25 PM Tuesday, October 21 2008

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#### This is Rosanne Wong

The story is a good one, and I just want to let Cynthia know that there is no reason for this concern over who her taxes are supporting in my case. I am a Canadian citizen, lived here most of my life, I was born here. I love my country and give back in every way possible whenever I get the chance. (I am active in community service to help out those with disabilities.) Trust me when I say that I couldn't love being a citizen of this great country, any more than I already do. I didn't have a lot of choice in the matter, as to where I would be living as that was my parent's choice. My childhood was in a way, extended--due to the head injury.

Submitted By RosieM at 4:16 PM Tuesday, October 21 2008

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**Good for her but...**

Good for her, but the comment above "As her insurance coverage ran out – and the company refused to renew her policy – bills for her medication that reached \$6,000 a month prompted her family to return to Canada, where they had moved from Jamaica 30 years earlier." makes me uncomfortable and needs explaining.... they moved from Jamaica to Canada to USA and when they needed our healthcare system they moved back??? A persons got to do what they've got to do to succeed, but this doesn't speak of patriotism or love for our Country.... leaves me with more questions.... particularly ones regarding where what and who my taxes are supporting...

Submitted By cynthia at 11:17 AM Tuesday, October 21 2008

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