Employee exemplifies the limitless possibilities that come from hard work and the Ut Prosim spirit

by LAURA NEFF-HENDERSON, APR

F
om her desk at the Virginia Tech Transportation Institute (VTTI), Laura Tollin spends her days analyzing data to detect errors and improvements in vehicles out in the field.

Tollin works in the Data Reduction and Analysis Support Center at VTTI where she maintains spreadsheets that track missing or misaligned camera and video footage and missing and/or inaccurate data from for hundreds of different vehicles involved in various research projects. She also codes and maps data for other research projects.

The Virginia Tech graduate spends her free-time swimming and enjoys working out at McComas Gymnasium, but in recent years, scuba diving has become her passion.

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And, while those characteristics alone don’t necessarily make her unique, she says that she does in all despite two disabilities, makes her incredibly rare and an example to those around her of the limitless possibilities of hard work, determination, and optimism.

Tollin estimates that she just may be “the only person in the world with the Pendred Syndrome and Spastic Paraplegia in one entity.”

Spastic Paraplegia is a degenerative disease that causes progressive stiffness and contraction in the lower limbs, as a result of damage to or dysfunction of the nerves. This neurological disorder is slowly stealing her ability to move her legs. She was diagnosed when she was 15 and began using a wheelchair full time in 2010.

“Essentially, I am slowly becoming paraplegic but with feeling in my legs,” said Tollin, who was born and raised in Charlotte, N.C.

Tollin’s deafness is caused by Pendred Syndrome, a genetic condition in which Tollin inherited “bad” genes for hearing from both of her parents – neither of whom is deaf. She wears a Cochlear Implant, is considered hard of hearing, and communicates with others orally and by using sign language.

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In the Water

Tollin first became interested in scuba diving in 2008 when a colleague, Andy Petersen, suggested she give it a try. She began taking classes and earned her certification and, a short time later, went on dive trips to Bonaine, in the Caribbean and Roatán, in Honduras.

A bad experience though, left her uneasy, and she took a break from the sport for three years before she decided to give it a try again and went in search of a refresher course.

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Tollin wears webbed gloves that help her swim without using her legs and keep her balance and needs a considerable amount of helping getting in and out of the water, according to Sanders. But being able to help her fulfill this dream and enjoy the peacefulness that come with scuba diving, he says, are well worth it.

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