

To be able to cook, and be outside

Sylvie Gionet's story

I underwent surgery last year after being diagnosed with syringomyelia. After the surgery, I no longer had pain but I also lost full use of my legs. I am not completely paralyzed — I can take at most 3 or 4 steps with a walker. After leaving the rehabilitation center, I went to live with my mother because I needed the help. In any case, I could not return to my apartment on the second floor; it was too much for me to climb.

Given that my mother is retired, she could help me with my transfers and I felt safe at her home. My mother was really invaluable to me at that time. But we knew that her condo was not really accessible in the way that I needed: there were steps to enter the apartment; I couldn't go everywhere with my manual wheelchair; I needed help to get into the bedrooms and the bathroom. Eventually, my mother wanted to sell her condo and move to a seniors' residence. I encouraged her because I wanted to start living alone again and regain more independence.

Before moving in with my mother, I had always been independent. I lived alone, I worked, I drove my car. I didn't ask for or need anything from anyone. That's why I was eager to find my solitude again. I wanted to discover my capabilities and be able to decide my routine: when to eat, what to eat, when to go to sleep.

I had spent the whole summer confined indoors. A home that was fully accessible would allow me to go outside.

However, the search for housing was a nightmare. I first searched on Google for "adapted housing for rent" suitable for people with disabilities. But the listings were for seniors' residences or private housing that was really out of my budget, as I depend on social assistance. I called cooperatives but the waiting lists were at least a year long. It had already been 3 years since I had applied for a low-income housing unit. I managed to change my application to adapted housing, but there's a very long waiting list and my situation was becoming urgent. My mother quickly found a buyer for her condo and I only had a few weeks left before risking ending up on the street. I called every organization in the directory for days, from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m.

Finally, 3 weeks before the move, the emergency service of the City of Montreal found me a place in a Seniors' Residence. When I visited the apartment, it was unsanitary, but I had no choice but to reserve it because otherwise, I would fall to the bottom of the list and incur a one-year penalty. It wasn't my choice to live in a residence for the elderly, as I am only 42 years old. However, finding adapted housing was so difficult that I accepted.

Where I am now is much better in terms of accessibility: there is a ramp to the building, automatic doors, and two elevators. However, inside the apartment, I don't have access to my balcony because there is a 3-inch step. The bathroom is also supposedly adapted, but not completely: I could enter, but there were no grab bars installed. That was my first request, to

have bars installed next to the toilet and the bath because it was dangerous for me to make transfers just relying on my walker.

In the kitchen, the counters are lowered but not the stove. I can't use it without risking burns. Likewise, I can't use the oven because I risk burning myself with the door. So, I make salads, and it's my mother who prepares meals for me. Otherwise, I also order and have food delivered, but this has a significant financial cost.

Having a universally accessible home would allow me to feel the way I did before. To do what I want, when I want, where I want. Especially in terms of food. I would like to cook a good steak on the stove with fresh vegetables. One gets tired of frozen meals.

With a universally accessible home, I would no longer need to depend on others. I am not asking for perfection, but to be as independent as possible, for cooking, for doing my laundry ... Oh, and to go onto my balcony so that I too can enjoy going outside.

