

Cameron McNeil – 2016 Wall of Fame Speech

Angela Lee Duckworth ground breaking work in Grit defines grit as, “passion and perseverance for long-term goals.” Importantly, her research highlights that it is not just talent or luck alone that correlates with long term success. It is “grit” an ability to work hard and hold steadfast to a goal, even when progress toward that goal is halting or slow.

When Cameron McNeil arrived at Terry Fox Secondary, he had in his words, “just scrapped by in Gr 8, including a barely passing grade in science.” But Cameron was determined to go to university. He believed he could contribute to the world in a meaningful manner. Cameron remembers watching a video on Terry Fox’s marathon of hope in planning 9. He was inspired by the daily determination and commitment that Terry’s journey required. So slowly, he worked to improve his marks. Each year, in increments, he made progress until eventually he had straight A’s in grade 12.

While in high school he also found time to master archery and he competed in the Summer and Winter Games, as well as Provincial Championships and even the Canadian Nationals. He credits his archery training for encouraging focus and discipline of mind as he continued to pursue his academic goals.

It was not easy to achieve his dreams of exploring science in university. He had help from his parents, his archery coach and his teachers. Ultimately, though, it was a dream that relied on Cameron’s own grit, his passion for his goal, his willingness to work harder than others and his persistence in the face of obstacles.

- Since leaving Terry Fox, Cameron has completed a First Class Honors Degree in Physics with a math minor at SFU. He is endlessly curious about life and physics; from fundamental symmetries of nature, particles and interactions, through to the physics governing many body atomic systems. He has also been a co-author on numerous scientific publications as well as presenting at various conferences.
- His work has earned him numerous scholarships and awards, including the NSERC Undergraduate Research Award at McMaster University, and the SFU Vice President Research Undergraduate Research Award.

Most recently Cameron has been accepted to graduate school in September at UBC in the field of subatomic physics at TRIUMF.

Cameron's curiosity and his desire to learn how the world and its particles work has helped him persist when many others would have given up. Cameron's academic achievements are impressive and worthy of recognition.

However, it is also worth noting that Cameron, the national athlete, the curious physicist, is also Cameron, a person with a diagnosed severe learning disability. Although school was not always easy, not always designed with his learning needs in mind, this challenge never weakened his resolve. Cameron's learning differences have never limited his ambition, his motivation or his achievement. His learning differences have required that Cameron be prepared to meet exceptional challenges with exceptional perseverance. He is a model to us all that pursuing our passions and persisting in the face of challenges is worthwhile. He proves that we are capable of making ourselves into more than we currently are if we are prepared to work at it, each and every day.

Cameron's exploration of science is only beginning but his journey provides us with a template for our own dreams.

Congratulations Cameron. Your grit is a trait we wish all of our students would emulate.

We are honoured to add your name to the Terry Fox Wall of Fame.