Kate Seader helps DSL participant C.J. create a new math worksheet on the computer

Kate Seader knows what it’s like to fall through the cracks and not receive services when she needed them. She also knows it’s up to her to deal with it.

“You have a responsibility to not give up,” she said. “You say OK, this happened, but now what do I need to do to cope with it?”

Seader, a 35-year-old graduate student in USU’s rehabilitation counseling program, was diagnosed with neurofibromatosis type 2 at age 15. The disease is characterized by the growth of non-cancerous tumors in the nervous system, which can lead to eventual hearing loss. It occurs in about 1 in every 33,000 people worldwide.

She was told she would lose her hearing eventually. Three years later, as an 18-year-old college freshman, it happened.

“The sudden loss was unexpected. In one day I found myself in a new world,” she said. “I lost hearing in both ears literally overnight. It happened so fast. I recognized that I would behave differently (after the hearing loss). I can see the perspective of both worlds.”

Seader completed undergraduate and graduate degrees in forestry and worked in the field for 15 years. She found, though, that she was never moving up, just adding experiences to her resume. That’s when she decided to make the jump to rehab counseling.

“I’ve had to adjust to so much, to brand-new social situations, to learn to advocate for myself, to learn the laws from the bottom up,” she said. “Also, dealing with chronic illness, insurance problems with pre-existing conditions, limits to quality of life because of that ... I finally just decided that those experiences would put me in a really good place to help other people. I want to help families and individuals find the resources to help make their lives better. I want to be the person to do that,” she said.

Seader was a research assistant to Dr. Kathleen Oertle during the last school year, focusing on transition research, and was named 2014 Rehabilitation Graduate Student of the Year by the National Council on Rehabilitation Education (NCRE) in April.

"I nominated Kate Seader for the award because she exudes excellence in all she does," said Oertle. "Kate is a present and future leader in the field of rehabilitation who should not be overlooked. She exemplifies NCRE's dedication to quality services for persons with disabilities through education and research."

“Ninety percent of the students (who had been nominated) were Ph.D. students, because they don’t focus on research at the master’s level,” Seader said. “But it’s important to know the background to guide you and know what other people have found that works, such as interventions. It saves you time from having to figure it out for yourself.”

Seader is completing her final internship at the Developmental Skills Laboratory to fulfill the requirements for a master’s degree in rehabilitation counseling and will sit for the Certified Rehabilitation Counselor exam in July.

The DSL has been a new experience, she said, but a good one.

“It’s a place where I can feel more involved,” she said. “I have experience already in state vocational rehabilitation office. I’ve already learned the ropes of procedures, but haven’t been very involved with people.

“DSL offered the internship and invited me in with open arms,” she said. "I float between the staff. There are two participants per staff member. It didn’t take me long to jump in and become more involved and get to know everyone better.”
Every morning each participant does individual work modeled after their behavioral plan and functional assessments, she said.

“I’ve read the case files to get strong background information and with that knowledge and the help of the staff, I join with one person who needs help,” she said.

She has been working with participant C.J. on math skills and crossword puzzles on the computer.

“I did a math sheet in like 10 seconds!” exclaimed C.J.

The Disability Resource Center provides a sign-language interpreter at the DSL so Seader can better orient to the activities throughout the room.

“I can read lips one-on-one, but I need to understand the context of what’s going on everywhere else,” she said.

Three mornings a week, she teaches independent living and social skills to a small group of participants. Each class focuses on specific behavioral goals like safely, hygiene, appropriate dress, or how to operate home appliances, she said.

Her future plans include a job in state vocational rehabilitation, most likely in Idaho, where she would be closer to family.

“They are heavily recruiting from our program, and there is a lot of opportunity to help reinvigorate the system,” she said. “Pocatello is a really good place. It has a larger base of people in the area who need VR. Idaho also has an interpreter training program so there would be a lot of opportunity for signing.”

While she is interested in working with young people, she doesn’t want to focus solely on deafness.

“I want to help everybody with a disability,” she said.