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Fighting Spirit: Optometry Student Overcomes Adversity to Graduate

Elkins Park, Pa. - For many, making it through graduate school is a feat in its own; but for **Kelly Morse, OD '19**, it is truly exceptional.

That's because during her time in Salus University's Pennsylvania College of Optometry (PCO) pursuing her Doctor of Optometry degree, Morse had to fight her way back from being paralyzed, in order to reach her dream of becoming an optometrist.

She is truly a testament to a fighting spirit.

During her second year at Salus/PCO, Morse suddenly came down with what she thought was the flu, but the fever didn't break, and she went home to Virginia to recover. Just days later, she was paralyzed from her nose down.

After rounds of medical tests, the consensus was that it was some kind of virus, most likely mosquito-borne, and her body reacted by attacking her entire nervous system. During the time she was in the hospital, her brother was in touch with Salus/PCO to keep them informed of what was going on. At that time, it was determined that Morse would be put on a leave of absence.

She was left partially paralyzed and it forced her to take a year off of school to recover. As she started to make progress, Morse was able to take classes remotely while continuing physical therapy at the International Center for Spinal Cord Injuries in Baltimore, Md.

"During this time, all of my professors were easy to get a hold of, and I spoke to several of them on the phone on numerous occasions when I had questions about the material," she said.

According to Morse, people tell her all the time about how impressed they are that she went back to school to finish. "For me, it was never an option *not* to," she said. "This is what I've wanted to do since third grade."

She fought her way back to campus in order to complete her on-campus patient care at [The Eye Institute](#) - which presented a whole new set of challenges.

Because the optometric equipment in the exam rooms weren't accessible from her new wheelchair, the team of faculty and staff found an exam chair lower to the ground and came up with other [adaptations](#) such as adding a string to the overhead light on the exam equipment so she could complete full exams all on her own. "It showed me how many people believed in me," she said.

She has learned a lot from what life has thrown at her - she used to have plans for everything. Now she's learned to appreciate that not having a plan is more freeing. "I've learned to take life one day at a time," she said.

Maybe that's why, as she prepared to graduate, she wasn't 100 percent certain what her long-term plan will be. And, she feels comfortable with that. "I don't know what I'll do in five years, but I hope I'm happy and healthy," she said.

Graduation itself has become a true celebration not only for her, but her family as well. As she received her diploma and officially became an optometrist, her entire family; her boyfriend and his family; and her best friend were all there to cheer her on. They went out to dinner afterwards to continue celebrating not only her graduation, but to mark a great accomplishment despite challenges that most likely would have changed the course for many, if not for a fighting spirit like Morse's.

It's now no longer a secret that she has become akin to challenges life throws at her. "I like to say that I moved to Philadelphia in a wheelchair, after being paralyzed from the nose down, and lived by myself for a year, so anything seems possible after that," she said. "But, in all seriousness, we all face challenges of different magnitudes at different times in our lives, and this was mine. I've overcome a lot, but I'm not done yet."

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About Salus University

Salus University, founded as the Pennsylvania College of Optometry in 1919, today is a diversified, globally recognized professional academic center of learning that offers a wide range of degree programs in the professions of Optometry, Audiology, Physician Assistant, Public Health, Blindness and Low Vision Studies, Biomedicine, Occupational Therapy and Speech-Language Pathology. Salus operates four clinical facilities in Philadelphia and Montgomery counties that provide highly specialized vision, hearing and balance, and speech-language pathology services. The University has more than 1,200 students, and more than 14,000 alumni worldwide. For more information, please visit www.salus.edu.