

## From Athabasca University **OPEN. ONLINE. EVERYWHERE**

### **Cathy McDONALD**



**Cathy McDONALD BPA '16, with her proud parents at Athabasca University's Convocation 2016. [photo credit: Cathy McDonald]**

**In an economic downturn and the increasingly volatile world of news media, recent Athabasca University graduate, Cathy McDonald, found a way to weather the storm. She embraced it, head-on.**

**The Calgary-based, former broadcast news reporter and radio promotions personality was able to shift career gears in a flash – all because she stayed the course when it came to her AU degree pursuit.**

When the going got tough juggling media with coursework, she'd just invoke her parents' words: "diversify your skills."

### Starting line

McDonald, 26, graduated in 2009 from SAIT's two-year Radio Television and Broadcast News diploma program. Immediately, she landed a gig in radio at the Rogers Media-owned 660 News in Calgary, working the 4 a.m. weekend shift as a reporter and audio editor. From there, she moved to internships at Harvard Broadcasting's X92.9 and at Aboriginal Peoples Television Network (APTN).

Compelled to acquire more education, in 2010 she registered in the Communications and Media Studies bachelor's program at the University of Calgary. It turned out to be short-lived. After only a few months in, McDonald decided that gaining valuable industry experience was more practical than completing her U of C degree at that time. The lure of broadcast news was still fervent so she put school on hiatus to take a job at Astral media (now Bell Media) for its FM Virgin Radio brand, along with sister stations CJay 92 and AM Classic Country.



McDonald's halcyon days working a Radiothon at Astral Media in Calgary. [photo credit: Cathy McDonald]

While there, she performed a variety of on-air news and traffic announcing, and promotional duties for the company, including providing her personality to charity Radiothons, such as those in support of Kids Cancer Care Foundation. A compassionate person at heart, who likes to serve both in her community and at home, for McDonald, the charity route felt good. It also felt close to home; McDonald's older sister Crystal, whom she considers "near and dear to my heart," has special needs that require her family's constant care.

Balancing act

Throughout her time in radio, an inner voice kept chirping at McDonald to reconsider finishing her degree. It was around that time she discovered Athabasca University. She liked its study-on-your-own-time-and-terms philosophy. She realized she wouldn't have to forfeit her paid work. So she transferred her U of C credits over to AU and began the art of balancing broadcast with the books.



Standing By at the news radio chopper in Calgary  
[photo credit: Cathy McDonald]

The balance was so perfect she decided to add more weight to the bar — propellers to be exact — to make the juggle more challenging. She took a weekend job as a helicopter news and traffic reporter with a company that outsourced its product to Global News TV and AM 770 radio.

"I was actually working radio Monday to Friday and then did helicopter traffic on the weekends *while* being at AU. It was insane," she attests.

### **Funding Her Way**

Parents, Ron and Gail, were a huge force in helping their daughter keeps her eye on the education prize. "They really wanted me to have more options other than just broadcasting," McDonald says.



And while for the most part she agreed with them, she was also clear to remind them it was she who had chosen those media jobs both during and in-between school stints which, in effect, made it possible for her to fund her education.

It's a feat of which she's incredibly proud. "I've always paid for school on my own — both of my degrees. It was a big decision on my end to save up money by working all those jobs. It wasn't cheap. It was hard," she explains, noting her parents helped foster her appreciation for financial independence.

Aside from her own financial savvy, McDonald took advantage of AU's exceptional scholarship program, receiving four awards at various junctures to help offset tuition costs. "Athabasca helped immensely because I had student loans. It was a great program to utilize because I don't think a lot of people do — especially when you're paying for school on your own; it's a nice financial help and relief," says McDonald.

### Layoff Lessons

While juggling both the airwaves and *airways*, McDonald kept her end-goal in sight which ultimately steadied her when, suddenly, her position at Bell came to an end due to downsizing in the tough market. Although devastated for a minute, she knew more fulfilling and effective opportunities were in store. She was able to regard the layoff as a blessing rather than a setback; her workload was instantly lessened leaving her with just the chopper work and her AU studies.

Not to mention the fact the world of media was becoming increasingly volatile with technology replacing human capital in newsrooms across the country. At this stage, McDonald could envision her Athabasca University Bachelor of Professional Arts degree in the not-too-distant future. *That*, no doubt, would cap off her suite of skills, both academic ones, and those acquired on-the-job.

*Athabasca helped immensely because I had student loans. It was a great program to utilize because I don't think a lot of people do — especially when you're paying for school on your own; it's a nice financial help and relief.* Ever the glass-half-full personality, looking back she acknowledges the fun times her broadcast sojourn provided.

"I got to do a lot of cool things with my helicopter job while doing Athabasca — some amazingly poignant and life-changing things. I covered the 2013 June floods, grisly crime scenes, shootings, fires, search-and-rescue missions in the mountains."

She even scored a brief stint as a flight attendant with WestJet. At this rate it would seem she was spending more of her time in the air than on the ground.

"I was either up in the skies with WestJet or in the chopper. *And* I was juggling both jobs with AU — I would overnight in Regina or Vancouver or Victoria, and I would do my AU assignments in the evenings." After realizing she had far too much on her plate, and missing her home time spent with her sister and family members, she decided to leave her commercial air gig and jumped at an "on-the-ground" opportunity to work for the Children's Wish Foundation as a development coordinator. Now feeling much closer to her comfort zone, she decided to exit her news chopper job with fond memories of her time spent in the skies. "That was my final break from not doing anything broadcast-related," she says.



Cathy McDonald and older sister Crystal  
at AU's Convocation 2016.  
[photo credit: Cathy McDonald]

**"All-In" at AU**

McDonald's parents attest that when it came to their daughter's study life, they witnessed flexibility at its finest with Catherine working her course load "at her own pace." *"I was either up in the skies with WestJet or in the chopper. And I was juggling both jobs with AU-I would overnight in Regina or Vancouver or Victoria, and I would do my AU assignments in the evenings."*

According to her mother, Gail: "Athabasca University gave [Catherine] the confidence and the flexibility and the comfort level of being able to study from any location rather than going to a set [physical] institution. "She notes her daughter's deep-seated determination to chip away at the coursework, all the while creating and staying abreast of her exit strategy, aka her graduation day. "I remember Catherine had Post-It notes in her study [indicating] her short-term goals [required] to achieve her degree," says Gail, adding that one of her goals was to complete 22 courses – something about which she remarked "seemed quite unachievable at the time." But achieve it she did. This past June, she finally reached her goal and walked the stage to accept her Bachelor of Professional Arts (BPA).

Also aiding in her push to the finish line was knowing that unlike many graduates, who find themselves in the throes of a competitive career search, McDonald had already found her niche. Right after she completed her degree from AU last summer, the corporate office of Jameson's Pub – a popular Irish tavern with two locations in Calgary – hired her as a sales and events manager in September. Just 10 months later, shortly before AU's June Convocation, her boss promoted her to Director, Marketing, Sales & Events. It's a job where McDonald can finally marry everything she learned in media, on the ground, in the air, and at AU.

**Source:** Propelled to lifelong learning July 15, 2016  
<http://news.athabascau.ca/arts/cathy-mcdonald/>

**TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN;**

May we publish "Propelled to lifelong learning July 15," Athabasca University graduate, Cathy McDonald's success story with her experience belonging your official permission in intWOJDE, non profit eJournal (/www.wojde.org) After browse journal could you give me your decision info please?

Cordially,  
Ugur Demiray, professor  
Intrnational affairs of intWOJDE  
[intwojde@gmail.org](mailto:intwojde@gmail.org)

Good Day, Mr. Demiray,  
Response to your request for publication  
Heidi Staseson [hstaseson@athabascau.ca] 22 July 2016 Friday, 19.31  
cc: [John O'Brien \[jobrien@athabascau.ca\]](mailto:John O'Brien [jobrien@athabascau.ca])

Thank you for your interest and reaching out to us with respect to the recent story we are featuring on AU graduate Cathy McDonald. We would be happy to honour your request to publish our story in your journal. Would you kindly email me a copy of the issue when it is published? I'd also be very interested in viewing some of your other stories related to online learning that you have featured. Are there a couple you feel might resonate for us? If you have any further questions, kindly reach out to me at this email address.

Warm regards,



**Heidi**

**Heidi Staseson, BAA Journalism, Communications Officer**  
**Athabasca University, 6th Floor, 345 – 6 Avenue SE, Calgary, AB T2G 4V1**  
**wk: 403 294 7324 403 294 7324;**  
**cell: 403 477 1871 403 477 1871;**  
**Fax: 403.298.2922**  
**email: [hstaseson@athabascau.ca](mailto:hstaseson@athabascau.ca)**  
**[www.athabascau.ca](http://www.athabascau.ca)**