

# Yvonne Singer:

## A Paragon of Perseverance

A remarkable young woman pits **optimism against obstacle**

### ALUMNI NEWS →

Yvonne Singer earned her bachelor's degree in psychology from Monmouth University in 1999 and her master's in psychology from Walden University in 2002. She recently joined the faculty of Middlesex County College as an adjunct professor. Appointed to the position in February, she will be teaching an online course in Introduction to Psychology.

BY IRENE FARRELL TOWT

At first glance, this would seem to be a typical class note that you might find in any college or university alumni magazine. But, in fact, it is much more than it appears. It is a happy ending to a real Cinderella story: a lifelong wish fulfilled not by the magic of a fairy godmother's wand, but through hard work, determination, and the help of a few central characters along the way. Most of all, this is a story about Yvonne Singer's commitment to scholarship, her intellectual capacity, her odyssey in search of a job in academia, and her perseverance in the face of major obstacles.

**B**eyond Singer's credentials in the field of psychology, the Monmouth grad has tallied up quite a collection of commas to punctuate accomplishments in many other fields: self-taught artist, web designer and animator, writer and poet, curriculum designer, and human rights advocate. Nonetheless, promising job opportunities for which she seemed more than qualified eluded her, and she came up disappointed time and again. For seven years after graduating from Monmouth, Singer pounded the

electronic pavement, sent off application packets by overland snail mail, and floated resumes and cover letters by the thousands in search of a professional position. All the while she continued her studies, completing the requirements for her master's degree.

But every new employment lead seemed to come to the same dead end, and her optimism and spirit began to flag. After constant researching, networking, bridge building, skill advancing, and resume retooling, her luck finally changed in the winter of 2006. Singer landed a position as

an adjunct instructor at Middlesex County College. She was assigned to teach Introduction to Psychology online—a course of her own creation—for the spring semester.

Okay, you might be thinking, what's so special about this story? Lots of newly minted grads had trouble finding positions in the tech-boom years of the late 1990s. Besides, that first job is always toughest to land, and the entry-level competition is fierce since you have no track record. Most of us have been there at one time. You just have to keep looking.

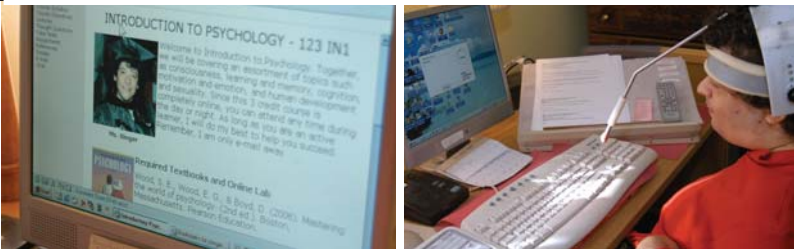
True enough, all.

But for those who don't know anything about Yvonne Singer—probably most of you reading these words—chances are that few, if any, have ever faced quite the same challenges she has faced either in search of employment or in the pursuit of daily life...

"I'VE NEVER MET A MORE DETERMINED SPIRIT THAN YVONNE. I taught her in an upper-level Psychology laboratory course. Her passion for pursuing her education was extraordinary, and she was a very positive force in the classroom."

★ DR. JUDITH NYE  
PSYCHOLOGY PROFESSOR

**"I'm Yvonne Singer.** I am a quadriplegic with cerebral palsy. I am here to say that, yes, living with severe disabilities is academically, socially, and professionally challenging. But, so what? You may have to work ten times harder than the average able-bodied person to reach your goals. So what? It *can* be done, and the important thing is to do it!"



## Yvonne Singer's Sources of Energy and Inspiration

**INTELLECTUAL:** HER BEST FRIEND, PROFESSOR BERNIE POOLE AT THE UNIVERSITY OF PITTSBURGH; ART; MUSIC; A GOOD JOKE, ESPECIALLY ONE OF HER OWNING MAKING  
**EMOTIONAL:** LAUGHTER, FRIENDSHIPS, PASSION FOR LEARNING  
**PHYSICAL:** CHOCOLATE AND PASTA  
**HEROES:** MANY...SEE LIST BELOW.

**"YVONNE SINGER WAS A STUDENT IN A CREATIVE WRITING CLASS I TAUGHT A NUMBER OF YEARS AGO.** One of her many excellent qualities is the courage she brings to her writing. She has always been unafraid to take on any topic, or offer constructive criticism to any person."

★ **RICHARD PARIS**  
ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR OF ENGLISH

Singer is as much a testament to the possibilities of life without the ambulatory power of legs or the manipulative ability of hands as Helen Keller was affirmation of the human spirit in a world without sound or sight. Unlike Keller, however, Singer was born into a century that had made considerable strides in bringing people with disabilities into mainstream society. From the ages of four to 10, she attended a residential school for the physically disabled designed expressly for children, where she received intensive physical, occupational, and speech therapy. As a result, Singer successfully learned to speak and type on a special communications device. With her new-found skills and the benefit of adaptive computer services, she was able to attend the local public school, and excelled in her academics. The hard work and training paid off in ways that Singer could never have envisioned at time...

Fast-forward to 2006. Yvonne Singer is seated in her electronic chariot ("wheelchair")

hardly seems the appropriate term) in front of her personal computer.

Improvisation is a lifestyle, as Singer devises ways and means to communicate efficiently and effectively. Daily she is adorned with a simple crown and practical scepter: headgear and pointer melded in a confluence of necessity and efficiency and authority. Together they make a mean machine: thought formed, head poised, pointer aimed, target hit. It is also a "green" machine, perpetually powered by Singer's actively engaged brain by means of the pointer. No batteries to recycle, no noise pollution, no repairs necessary.

Not least of all, it's a team machine, collaborating with the computer constantly. With a slight bow of the head and tiny tap on a chosen key, the pointer deftly hits its mark. Special word and phrase predicting software enables Singer to retrieve standard dictionaries and build custom ones. Most of all, with instant access to the internet, Singer travels, socializes, debates, shares,

empathizes, learns, jokes, and engages in the boundless possibilities of the outside world. Any time she cares to connect.

As a Monmouth University student, Singer raised disability awareness among the professors and classmates through articles she wrote for *The Outlook* and the *Monmouth Review*.

Her mere presence in the classroom was enough to challenge preconceptions about her limited ability to participate, and her intellectual engagement left no doubt of just how capable she really was. Now as a college instructor herself, Singer has notched off yet another life goal on her endless "to do" list.

"Yvonne's credentials are impressive," says Professor John Gutowski, chairman of the Department of Psychology and Education at Middlesex County College. "Of those instructors who prepared to teach an internet course, her work was in the top 10%. She has also been an advocate for two students with special circumstances who enrolled late in the course. I have been taken by her flexibility."

There's no telling what Singer will set her sights on next. As she expressed in one of her many poems written while a student at Monmouth: "Never give up on flying high..."

**Justin Dart**, who had polio, was a leader of the international disability rights movement and a renowned human rights activist. **Christopher Nolan**, author of a novel entitled *Under The Eye Of The Clock*, has a severe case of cerebral palsy and types with his head pointer. **Billy Golfus**, an award-winning journalist, was brain injured in a motor scooter accident ten years ago. **Dan Keplinger**, who has cerebral palsy, paints with his head pointer. **Gaby Brimmer**, who also had a severe case of cerebral palsy, composed a few published novels with her left foot. **Kyle Maynard**, who has congenital amputation, wrote a book entitled *No Excuses*. **Bill Porter**, with mild cerebral palsy, is a door-to-door salesman. **Arthur Campbell Jr.**, born with cerebral palsy, strongly advocated for his rights. **Mattie Stepanek**, who was born with a rare form of muscular dystrophy, played his Heart Songs. **Ken Kroll**, with cerebral palsy, married and wrote a novel called *Enabling Romance*. **Ed Roberts**, who had polio and lived at home with his mother, was an advocate for people with disabilities. **Greg Smith**, with muscular dystrophy, is currently running *The Strength Coach*. Although **Annette Funicello** has multiple sclerosis, she is still friends with Mickey Mouse. **Christy Brown**, another famous author, had cerebral palsy as well. He painted and typed with his left foot. **Nancy Mairs**, who has multiple sclerosis, charms the world by writing articles and novels. **Stephen Hawking**, a very popular scientist, has ALS and uses a voice synthesizer to give lectures. Although **Michael J. Fox** and **Muhammad Ali** have Parkinson's disease, they are fighting the good fight in the center ring. **Christopher**

**Reeve**, who became severely physically handicapped after a fall at an equestrian event, inspired other disabled people to keep reaching for the stars. **Brooke Ellison**, who became severely physically disabled from an automobile accident, is currently earning a Ph.D. from SUNY Stony Brook. Even though **Joni Tada** became physically disabled from a diving accident, she continued living by getting married, writing a few novels, and promoting her religious beliefs. **Richard Pryor**, a comedian with multiple sclerosis, lit up the sky with his dynamic personality. Although **Patricia Neal** became physically disabled after having numerous massive strokes, she made a full recovery and returned to her acting career, thanks to having a very unusual husband. **John Hockenberry**, a paraplegic news reporter, makes the public aware that the disabled are people too. **John Callahan**, a quadriplegic cartoonist, and **Geri Jewell**, another comedian who has cerebral palsy, tells the world, "Folks, did you know that disabled people have the ability to laugh and to make others laugh?" **Henry Holden**, a comedian who has polio, informs the public, "Attitudes are the real disability." **Itzhak Perlman**, a musician who also has polio, teaches the world, "Disabled people can certainly dance." **Helen Keller**, who was deaf and blind, strongly advocated for disabled rights as well as women's rights. And yes, even **President Franklin D. Roosevelt** had polio. If all these people were non-disabled, they would not be considered to be inspirations or heroes because society would accept them.

## Locked In a Wall

BY YVONNE SINGER '99

Whimpering, but no sound is heard.  
 Tears are always seen, but hardly touched.  
 Trembling, but cannot move a muscle.  
 Sleeping, but dreams cannot come alive.

Feelings are expressed, but often ignored.  
 Try to spread sunshine, but hate is everywhere.  
 Holding a cherub is a blessing, but just brings more sorrow.  
 Rainbows can create beauty, but humans refuse to look.

Typing is a fine art, but the communication gap seems to be growing wider.

Breathtaking to have freedom to let one's mind flow into another world, but so many think that this is a sin.  
 To spin in the nude on mother nature's soft sparkling rose petals refreshes the weak soul, but it just damages reality's positive attitude.  
 Written words are supposed to be understood and heard so that bleeding hearts can mend, but morons just use these profound thoughts in war.

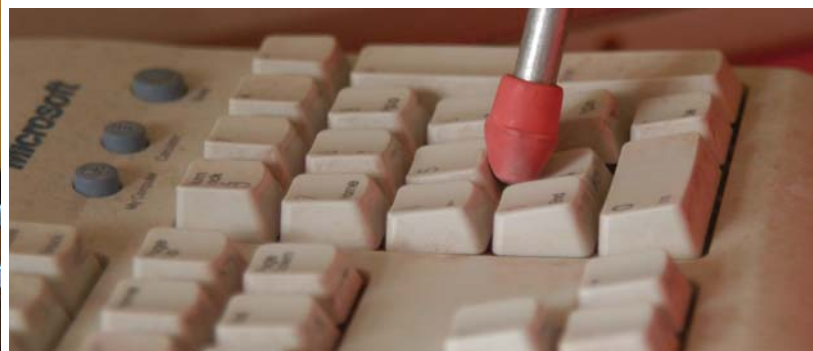
Intelligence lurks in so many places, but it is never noticed.  
 Bloody mad, but nobody gives a dime.



# Can you help me get a **paying job**?

Yvonne contacted me out of the blue as a result of coming across my postings to the EDTECH listserv (an online discussion forum for educators who are committed to integrating technology into teaching and learning). The question she had for me was a simple one. My answer to her was equally simple: “Yes, I’ll certainly do what I can. But in the meantime, if you’re bored, with time on your hands, you can work for me—though I won’t be able to pay you.”

Thus began a friendship that has become significant for both of us. I’ve learned so much about the problems faced by the millions of people in the United States who have a disability.



Yvonne has learned that there is work that she can do—such as web page design, web site maintenance, and, more recently, online teaching—for which people will pay.

I sowed the seed of the idea to teach online by informing Yvonne that, at the college level, one does not necessarily need teacher training in order to teach. Training helps, of course, but there are many excellent college level teachers who have had little or no training.

So she started applying for jobs with online schools.

Yvonne didn’t need much motivation from me. She has a dogged, determined personality. How else, severely disabled with cerebral palsy, could she have survived the demands of an advanced education? She sent out application after application, month after month, with some interest expressed here and there. But there was no meaningful interest in hiring her until Professor John Gutowski at Middlesex County College formally asked her to apply.

Middlesex has provided wonderful professional, technical, and pedagogical support. I am sure Yvonne will make a success of her newfound teaching career. I will be her friend at every turn, especially during those first few semesters when she will be finding her way. At MCC, however, she could not be on a more engaging path.

## Learn More:

If you would like to learn more about Yvonne Singer, her philosophy, ideas, art, or online psychology course, you may access any of the following websites:

<http://home.att.net/~ysinger/>

<http://home.att.net/~ymsinger/>

<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/ysdisABILITY/>

<http://yvonningsinger.tripod.com/snoopy.htm>

[http://www.geocities.com/y\\_singer/](http://www.geocities.com/y_singer/)



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