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Renata Donohue suggests the following list of qualifications for a career in computers: detail-oriented, good at multitasking, the ability to organize your thoughts, and great people skills. Her list does not include having a background in computers or being a man.

At the age of 34, Renata was the mother of a two-year old and the stepmother of a 14-year old. She had moved to British Columbia only five years earlier. Yet she was not afraid to take on more challenges. In fact, she was eager for them. “I don’t want to be limited to positions as a clerk or retail associate for the rest of my life. I

want a career where I can keep advancing and learning.” Without a degree, however, Renata knew that her options would be limited.

Renata enrolled at the University of the Fraser Valley (UFV), which offers more than 80 certification and diploma programs. Despite the fact that she had very little exposure to computers, Renata asked about UFV’s Computer Information Systems (CIS) program, which she knew to be a traditionally male-dominated area. “I knew that people would probably suggest a degree in business administration, accounting, or teaching. These are

all fields that are traditionally ‘female friendly.’ But I was determined to break gender stereotypes.”

“An information technology degree not only teaches you to solve computer problems, it gives you a solid foundation for many other career choices, from criminology to health-care. It’s also a field where you are constantly learning and growing, and that’s what I wanted.”

The first step was a meeting with the head of the CIS department, Ora Steyn, who suggested that Renata try a couple of CIS courses. She started in the summer of 2008 with a hardware course and an intro

duction to computer programming. There were four women and 30 men in the first course, and six women and 14 men in the second course. But Renata was not intimidated. “I knew that there would be more men than women in all of my courses. If anything, it pushed me to work harder.”

In the fall of 2009, Renata took CIS192, an introduction to networking that combines Cisco® Networking Academy® CCNA 1 and 2 courses. She freely admits that she was scared at times, but she studied hard and did extremely well, surprising even herself. Renata found that she was especially drawn to the hands-on nature of networking. “Programming is quite interesting, but networking is definitely more appealing. I learn best by doing, and the Cisco labs are fascinating to me.”

Renata applied for – and was awarded – one of the Women in IT scholarships sponsored by the Association of Canadian Community Colleges and Cisco.

“Winning the scholarship gave me even more encouragement and confidence. I feel like Cisco is playing an important role in helping me build the career I’ve always wanted.”

“I thought you had to be somehow gifted to learn networking technology. It’s definitely

challenging. But I’ve gained the confidence to know that I am as good as anyone else in the class – even the male students who have been tinkering with computers since they were kids. My instructors also inspire me. They’re always so passionate about what they’re teaching, and seem to have never-ending patience for my questions.”

Renata’s CIS instructor, Robert McAuliffe, is not surprised that she is doing so well. “She is always planning ahead. I recall her contacting me well before classes started to make sure she had all the right books and materials. In class, she is very hard working, and always wants to understand things from all perspectives. As a teacher, I feel an overwhelming sense of purpose and pride thinking that I might be playing a small part in her accomplishments.”

The CIS program also offers cooperative (co-op) education options, helping students obtain paid internships at local companies while taking classes at night. As the mother of two children, it is essential for Renata to continue working while she earns her degree, and the co-op program is a way to earn money and get experience on the job. In order to work and go to school, Renata babysits her neighbors’ children, and they babysit her young son while she is in school or at her co-op job. She studies at night and on weekends. She knows that it will take her longer to finish her educa-

tion while working, but she advises everyone to “take advantage of any opportunity to get work experience, [which] is invaluable on your resume.”

Once she has earned all of the co-op work-study units she is allowed, Renata will take the remaining Cisco Networking Academy courses offered during the day, which include topics such as learning to design, build, and maintain LANs, WANs, and wireless LANs. “My school offers a wide range of other upper level networking courses that I will be taking to complete my networking concentration. I can’t wait to take the classes.”

Currently, Renata is doing her co-op work at the Abbotsford Police Department. “Unfortunately, my responsibilities have not allowed me to work in their network operations centers, but it doesn’t stop me from asking them all the time: ‘When can I?’”

In fact, Renata has three words of advice for women who are hesitant about an education in ICT:

“Ask. Ask. Ask. Don’t be afraid to ask questions or ask for help. Your instructors, fellow students, and colleagues all want you to be successful. They don’t want you to be intimidated – they want you to be inspired!”

See her video at [www.cisco.com/web/learning/netacad/us-can/impact.html#~Videos](http://www.cisco.com/web/learning/netacad/us-can/impact.html#~Videos)