

# Tales from a chair...

When the opportunity arose for a member of *The Print* to do an investigative piece on wheelchair accessibility, I decided that I would spend one whole school week (five days) bound to a wheelchair as if I was paralyzed from the waist down. In this position of a wheelchair-bound individual: attending classes, meeting with professors, running errands, and even going to work.



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Feature Editor

The following is a diary chronicling my experiences, feelings and thoughts during those five days.

## DAY ONE:

**8:45 a.m.** – OK. I'm off. Already, five days seems like a lot, but I suppose it's nothing compared to someone spending his or her whole life in a wheelchair. It isn't until I get going down the parking lot that I realize it would have been nice to have the luxury of a handicap-parking sticker. My chair won't fit through the cars in the lot, and so I am forced to travel around the cars in order to reach the sidewalk.

It's a little icy this morning and I'm having trouble getting over a bump on the sidewalk (it's a big bump). Everytime I push my wheel, the wheel spins, but I don't go anywhere. However, I am determined to make it...after all, I've only been sitting here for five minutes.

A guy walks by me and gives me an embarrassed look, but he keeps walking. That's fine, he was probably in too much of a hurry to give me a little push.

**11:00 a.m.** – My usual seat in the front of the classroom in Barlow 112 is not very accommodating to people in wheelchairs, so I sit in the back of the classroom using my notebook as a make-shift table. Maybe next class I'll try to squeeze my chair behind a desk in the back of the class.

## DAY TWO:

**9:05 a.m.** – I'm late to class because it took me forever to get out of the parking lot again. On my way to class to Barlow I suddenly realize I'm looking down a long, steep wheelchair ramp and it doesn't look very inviting. A bunch of automotive students are chatting on the couches below the ramp and I'm faced with the realization that I have the potential to make a fool out of myself.

I start down the ramp slowly, trying to grasp the turning wheels with my hands to slow them down. But it's too late, I've already lost control of one of the wheels and in order to keep myself from spinning into the cement wall to my left, I let go of

the other wheel. Doing this caused my wheelchair to race out-of-control down the ramp.

My instinct is to put out my feet to protect me from the impact of hitting the railing down below. However, I quickly reminded myself that if I really was paralyzed...my feet wouldn't help me.

Suddenly, my chair hits the wall at full-force. My body lurches forward and I smacked my head on the blue railing. I sat there for a moment wondering if I should laugh, cry or become angry.

I heard the chatting automotive students start to snicker and a few couldn't control letting out loud laughs in my direction. They couldn't have known I wasn't really wheelchair-bound? Could they have? While I decided to take the "that was kind-of funny" approach to the whole situation, I still couldn't believe the gall of those students who laughed at my expense. I would like to see them try it.

**2:00 p.m.** – Nature calls. This is my first time venturing into a bathroom on campus and I don't really know how to...well...get myself from the chair to the toilet. I'm tempted to leave the chair behind, but I decide I'm going to give it a try.

There are two bathrooms close to me. The first requires going up "The Barlow Ramp of Death" (as I have decided to call it), which I have no interest in doing. And the second one is upstairs. So, I roll into the elevator and venture to the restroom.

Right off the bat, something doesn't go too well. This door isn't an automatic door, and it is heavy and big. I do my best to open it enough to squeeze through, but it took several times of wheeling forward and wheeling back in order to make it work.

Then, I realize that even though the bathroom says it's handicap-accessible...it isn't. I can't get my chair inside the stall. I try to cram it inside, but the whole structure shakes and I'm sure I terrified the other woman using the stall next to mine.

Finally, I give up. I don't have time to find another bathroom, I've decided I'll wait until I get home.

**6:00 p.m.** – I am going to Clackamas Town Center to shop and decide to use this opportunity to see how other buildings accommodate people in wheelchairs. It doesn't take long to realize that all the automatic doors at Clackamas are a luxury. Luckily, I don't encounter many doors on my way through the mall.

What I do encounter is crowded shops with no room to maneuver. The "don't touch" shop (as my little brother calls it) is impossible, so I don't even try. I know that it wouldn't take long for me to knock something very valuable over.

Finding elevators in a few of the department stores was a task, but people were very helpful in pointing me to the right direction.

I am very thankful that it isn't a busy night at the mall. There are some moments when I can't seem to get around people

and there are a few who are oblivious to me. I think I would be even more of a nightmare if it were

## DAY THREE:

**7:45 a.m.** – It's raining slightly today and soon as I start wheeling I realize that my arms are like Jello. My classroom in Pauling seems so far away and I choose to traverse the outside path through the parking lot than to attempt the Barlow Ramp of Death.

However, as soon as I get going I realize that I chose poorly; the road to Pauling that runs behind Barlow is bumpy and uneven; there are no sidewalks to keep me out of the way of traffic. A car speeds by through a mud puddle, but it misses getting me drenched in water and dirt. When I reach the sidewalk entrance, leading to the back of Pauling, I'm tired, wet and emotionally drained.

A few people pass me, walking in the same direction, they can see that I'm struggling to get my wheels to turn and my frustration is starting to show. Finally I snap...realizing that no one is coming to help, that I'm late for my Biology lab and my hands are frozen and caked with mud...and I start to cry.

I have two options. 1) Compromise my journalistic integrity, get up and walk to class. After all, I am only pretending to be paralyzed. Or 2) Gather energy, push through the mud, and keep moving.

I choose the latter.

When I reach Pauling, a flood of my friends and I'm almost there. As an answer to my prayers, my friends from *The Print* arrive and help me break and they assist me the remainder of the



lab course than I can handle. I'm over the top. I'm the lab manager. I'm unseated. I'm up and running. I'm a friend. I'm Ryan. I'm a people person. I'm looking for Greg. I'm a movie star.

Oswego) and I came to realization that I couldn't be in a wheelchair. My chair doesn't fit in the

cession stand or the ticket booth. Also, as a wheelchair user, we wouldn't be able to get upstairs to start the movie. Truly isn't anything I can do at work and it's

## DAY FOUR:

**12:20 p.m.** – I'm hungry. So, I travel to the cafeteria to replenish my blood sugar levels with a bag of chips and a rice krispie treat (well, my wheelchair is

me hungry). However, when I get to the cafeteria

