

Barriers

From Page 5

individuals takes much more than a cement ramp: it takes careful planning and genuine understanding. It takes knowing what it's like to be restricted.

Certainly, there are all sorts of handicaps: blindness, deafness, dyslexia ... the list goes on. I concentrated on a specific physical handicap. I arranged to be paralyzed from the waist down. I could move my arms and head, but not my feet or legs. My eyes and ears were as sharp as ever, and I relied upon them in my research. What I saw, heard and experienced on that day will remain with me always.

What is it like to be handicapped?

I began at 9 a.m. in the Jordan Gym parking lot. Pendulum assistant editor Cheryl Kern wheeled me across the street toward the fountain. We reached the brick walkway, and I tried to propel myself. The bricks were uneven, and the slope of the walkway was far steeper than it had seemed all those times I had travelled by foot or bicycle. People stopped and stared as I made my slow journey.

At Alamance, I tried to get through the side door near Duke. This was my only point of entry because the front door and other side door near Carlton lay blocked by what had previously been a few cement steps.

I wrestled with the door and finally managed to open it. My wheelchair was facing forward, but I had met an obstacle: the lip on the doorjam was so high that the chair couldn't cross. To force myself over the lip, I needed to take a "running" start; but in the time it took to back up the chair and prepare myself, the door had swung shut. After several attempts, I gave up, and Cheryl wheeled me through the doors.

Once inside Alamance, I headed for the restroom to the handicapped stall. It was a tight squeeze, but I entered the stall and turned around. I have no idea how a wheelchair-bound person makes use of such facilities, so entering and backing up was about all I did. The sinks were low enough for me, but they were so low that the counter edge hit my knees. I strained to reach the faucet and soap. Had my arms been slightly shorter, I couldn't have turned on the water. Exiting the restroom was another challenge altogether. A couch blocked my path as I tried to open the door. Again, Cheryl had to help me.

On my way out of Alamance, I struggled through the door of the cashier's office. It was a tight squeeze once I was inside, and the counter was too high to see over.

At College Coffee, I was greeted by more stares and questioning glances. I served my own drink, but I couldn't hold the cup and wheel around. Most people were courteous and made a path for me; others seemed oblivious to the chair and were in danger of having their toes run over. Navigating my way around the fountain was especially difficult because the bricks were uneven.

I slowly moved to Carlton, trying to steer clear of the loose bricks on the walkway. My 10:10 sociology class was moved to Carlton, one of the few classroom buildings that is wheelchair accessible. If I were truly handicapped, my classes would be moved to Duke, Carlton, Jordan Gym or the Fine Arts Building.

The ramp leading to Carlton was easy to climb, but I held up traffic by trying to open the door. For a wheelchair-bound person, doors that open outward must be approached in a systematic manner: the chair is wheeled backward to the door's edge. The person must then grab the handle and swing around, forcing his or her way through the opening.

Getting out of Carlton was a different story altogether. The ramp that seemed so tame on my way in suddenly



A slight dip in the courtyard between Duke, Mooney and Alamance makes for a difficult journey.

appeared much steeper. I felt like I was on a roller coaster as I careened to the bottom.

By this time, I felt confident in my own "driving" abilities. I made my way to Mooney to meet Cheryl, and we went to Long, which was once again unapproachable by the front entrance. I used the wheelchair ramp next to the Grille. This ramp was much steeper than the one at Carlton, and it was difficult getting through the double doors. One door was locked. I jockeyed the chair, blocking the locked door and swinging through the unlocked one.

In Long, I retrieved my mail from a box coincidentally positioned at wheelchair height. In the lobby I met Jim Bush, a Pendulum columnist who had agreed to accompany me on my rounds. Once again, exiting the building was an adventure. Rolling down the steep ramp was terrifying. At the bottom of the ramp is a water pipe that pokes through the brick walkway. Had I hit this pipe at my warp-speed, I probably would have been thrown from the chair. Fortunately, I spotted the pipe before any catastrophe occurred.

Suppose I wanted to go to College Chapel or see a SUB-sponsored movie. Could I get into Whitley Auditorium? If I conquered the uneven pavement from Long to Whitley, I could make it to the auditorium's wheelchair ramp; but the handicapped-accessible door was locked. Jim wheeled me through another door. Inside Whitley, there is a nice space — an "aisle seat" — to rest a wheelchair. However, I would not have been able to get to the stage from the auditorium. Jim said I would need to enter the building through another door and approach from backstage.

I could get into the Print Shop provided that someone would open the door of Carlton on that side. The railing, makes it nearly impossible to "swing around," as is necessary when approaching a door that opens outward. I would also need to master pretty fancy steering maneuvers to avoid crashing into the water fountain or staircase as I tried to avoid falling down the steps leading to the bathroom.

To pay a parking ticket or visit the security office would be impossible. West is inaccessible to wheelchairs.

Elon students are expected to go to the library at least once in their college careers. Would it be possible for

a student in a wheelchair? The ramp leading to the library was steep, but conquerable. Once again, the lip on the front door made for a difficult entrance, so Jim helped me. The wheelchair moved slowly on the carpet. I could reach the card catalog, but, again, with shorter arms I couldn't have done so. The computers were accessible, as was much of the reference material.

Naturally, books and magazines on high shelves needed to be retrieved by someone else. Library workers said they could get microfilm from downstairs or any books located on the second floor or in the basement. Moving through some of the aisles was inconceivable, though. The bookshelves were so close that the wheelchair wedged in between. My conclusion: a wheelchair-bound student could use the library only with a great deal of assistance — and patience — from fellow students or library staff.

Eating. I couldn't get through a day without it. But would I have to sacrifice my stomach because I couldn't function in McEwen Dining Hall? The ramp to the building was the steepest yet. My arms and back ached as I propelled myself up the ramp. Again, the lip on the door blocked my entrance. Someone pushed me through. Had I wanted to eat upstairs, I couldn't, but downstairs was fine. The employee checking cards directed me to the wheelchair-level table, and I prepared to dine.

As I rolled toward the serving line, people's eyes focused on the chair. Someone sitting at a table smiled and nodded. This was the big test: could I get everything I needed and make it to the table without causing too much of a scene?

I couldn't reach the silverware, but one of the servers handed me the utensils. Instead of handing my plate of food over the counter, another server passed it under the protective plastic screen.

So far, so good. But how could I get the tray to the table? Enter Janice Spangler, a sophomore and a complete stranger. She offered to take my tray to the table and even got my drink. When I finished eating, she cleared my place and returned the tray. Of every facility I entered that

See Barriers, Page 7