

MOVING FORWARD

BY EMILY MCINTYRE

People with disabilities in Athens face hardship daily, but varying disabilities create unique obstacles to overcome. Meet a few of OU's own who face an uphill battle far greater than Morton or Jeff Hill.



PHOTO BY MEGAN WESTERVELT



PHOTO PROVIDED BY SHANTI EPP



PHOTO BY DANIEL RADER

The handicap symbol — most able-bodied people see this white stick figure in a wheelchair as another familiar icon they've come across repeatedly in the background of their lives. However, this isn't the case for the disabled. They are reminded each time they see this symbol, whether in a wheelchair or not, that their disability will most likely be prevalent their entire life.

Though there might not be any chance of the symbol changing in the near future, one thing that *can* be changed

is the perspective of those without a disability. In the eyes of professor Dr. Carolyn Lewis and sophomores Shanti Epp and Christopher Martin, who each live with different disabilities, "handicapped" does not always mean "confined to a wheelchair."

Overcoming the Unexpected

Lewis, who is director and general manager emerita of WOUB Public Media, as well as an instructor in the School

of Communication Studies and School of Media Arts and Studies, has experienced firsthand the exponential improvement of accessibility on campus since she came to OU in 1997. Lewis suffered from a spinal cord tumor in the 1980s that left her unable to walk normally on her own. She now uses a power wheelchair.

"I started having terrible back pain and arm pain in the '80s. I just thought it was overwork or not sleeping enough," Lewis explains. "I woke up one morning and had been back and forth to the doctor for about a month, and I just hit the floor in the bedroom; I was paralyzed." After conducting an MRI, her doctor came across the unthinkable: a tumor in her spinal cord.

Lewis' only chance at putting an end to the excruciating pain in her back and arms was an 18-hour surgery. If she made it through surgery, she would be in a vegetative state for the rest of her life.

"My physical therapy doctor there said he did a search and there were only 20 people in the world at the time that they knew [who] had this kind of condition," Lewis says.

For Lewis, it was a lengthy and arduous two months and two days in rehab. She had to relearn everything, including bodily functions: how to go to the bathroom, how to walk and how to pick things up. Lewis fell a year later when coming out of a building and felt her leg starting to slow down again. After strolling the OU campus bricks during her job interview in July 1997, she was hired. With the start of the school year, Lewis had grown weak again and required a wheelchair.

Today, not much holds her back from living and loving her life to the fullest. But as buildings on campus claim to be accessible, they do not always provide adequate space to accommodate her wheelchair. For example, the family bathroom on the first floor of Schoonover Center has a door that swings the wrong way.

"I've got to figure out how I'm going to close the door, you know? So I have to go back out, and kind of pull back in," Lewis demonstrates as she spins around her office, pushing a series of buttons on the arm of her automated wheelchair. Another issue

exists because of how some soap dispensers in the Baker Center bathrooms are on the back wall and especially hard to reach.

The curb cuts and cracks on campus are difficult to navigate around as well, particularly the one between Lasher Hall and Central Classroom Building, which Lewis crosses frequently. Generally, elevators are more efficient for her because ramps require significant arm strength on the days she uses her manual wheelchair.

Above all, time seems to be an eternal enemy and one of the greatest inconveniences.

"I know at 15 minutes before it's time for me to get the van to leave my house. I know at what point I need to be dressed and everything. If I'm not at that point in 15 minutes, then I'm going to be late — any little thing might throw me back. You just really have to have vision and plan everything that you do."

More Than a Canine Companion

Shanti Epp faces different challenges with a Medical Alert service dog, named Noble, at her side.

"People don't [always] know what a service dog is or aren't used to it. You can get a lot of backlash," Epp says. "I'm lucky to have not gotten any to my face, but I've heard people who knew my friend and asked, 'Is she allowed to have a dog in here?'"

Epp, a French major who lives off-campus, has the golden retriever at her side as often as she needs. Despite the fact that Noble has learned over 100 commands during training, he does have his "bad" days and is not always on his absolute best behavior. Service dogs need a break every once in a while in addition to playtime. In fact, Noble loves to cuddle with his owner and is a proclaimed "lovebug."

Most people assume that service dogs are associated with the blind, but Epp insists, "It's not always physical. It's not always a guide dog, or you're not always mobility-impaired."

Getting around campus isn't as serious of an issue with Noble, because Shanti doesn't require the use of a wheelchair or crutches. Fortunately, he tolerates escalators and elevators well.

"I usually rely on Noble, just because usually only my close friends know about the details of my disability," Epps says.

However, the road to attaining a reliable service dog wasn't



PHOTO BY KEVIN RIDDELL
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easy, considering all the training Noble had to complete.

The amount of time it takes a dog to be trained and certified can vary depending on its age and temperament. Puppies can take up to two years to complete this process because they must be socialized, trained on the basics, and must take a temperament test. Between puppyhood and adulthood, a dog's temperament fluctuates a great deal.

"If you get them around 2 years of age or older, from what I've heard, they're past their 'teenage phase' where they act out a lot," Epp says.

Determination: From Steps to Strides

Christopher Martin, a sophomore broadcast journalism and sports management major, was born three months premature and diagnosed with cerebral palsy at birth. To compensate for the difficulties he has with maintaining his balance, Martin has used crutches since the age of three. Despite how he can walk fine without his crutches, he chooses to rely on them because they make him feel more at ease.

Although using crutches has become second nature for the

20-year-old, he still trips and falls occasionally. When this happens, he laughs it off, hops back on his feet, and keeps moving. Martin accepts his cerebral palsy and refuses to let it get in the way of anything.

"Having a disability only impacts a person if they choose to let their disability impact them," Martin says. "I personally choose to not place any special emphasis on my disability. I view myself like everyone else, I just happen to use crutches."

Fortunately, getting around campus has become much more manageable as Martin has grown accustomed to the Athens area.

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Sophomore Broadcast Journalism and Sports
Management Major

He approaches some of the more challenging places accordingly. "A minor inconvenience associated with the handicapped accesses on campus is that they are actually farther from the main entrance to the buildings," Martin says. "Since these entrances are often further away, I frequently take the steps — that can be frustrating at times — simply because it is faster than walking around to the handicap accessible entrances."

On the bright side, Martin has yet to experience a problem that could not be fixed when it comes to asking for assistance when needed.

Resilience Remains

One of the common struggles Lewis, Epp and Martin share is with weather conditions such as heavy rain, ice and snow.

"You just can't maneuver in mud and rain; it's hard," Lewis stresses. "That's why it's so important that the street departments of the university keep the streets clear, because otherwise you're just stuck, and you can't have accessibility in the snow and the ice. Fortunately, coming down the hill here between Lasher and Central, it's always clear."

With a service dog, Epp must help protect Noble's shaggy coat and paw pads.

"If it's super snowy or super icy, then I have to watch out for him and [myself]," Epp says. "When it's super rainy outside, when I first got him, I didn't have a raincoat for him, so I would be walking through the rain with a wet dog. Then, walking into class with a wet dog is not always the best."

Martin says that although he still trips and stumbles on campus during the summer, the icy state of sidewalks and hills are especially troublesome in the winter.

"The many hills on campus, like Morton or Richland, definitely are the most challenging. When conditions are harsh, I usually just walk slowly and cautiously and hope for the best," he says.

The most important thing that the disabled community in Athens wants able-bodied people to know is that they are still just like everyone else, regardless of their mental or physical differences.

"One size doesn't fit all. Everyone's disability has a different degree or variation. Don't lump everybody into the same category," Dr. Lewis emphasizes. "Be sensitive; it's people first." **b**