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HOT

'There's just little things': SU student's experiences reveal challenges of living with a disability

By MOLLY WILLIAMS The Winchester Star
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Elizabeth Pelish, a local resident who attends Shenandoah University, says that as a student with a physical disability, she sometimes encounters "little things" that make it hard for her to navigate campus, even though the school has a high Americans with Disabilities Act compliance rating. She's sharing her experiences to raise awareness.

Provided photo

WINCHESTER — When she thinks of her experience as a Shenandoah University student, local resident Elizabeth Pelish has largely positive things to say.

The English major, who is also pursuing minors in media and history, believes SU is a great school with lots of diversity and opportunity, and says so she's far formed strong friendships and encountered supportive professors and staff.

But as a student with a physical disability, she's also faced some challenges during her time at SU. Pelish was born with a rare congenital birth defect that causes her legs to be weak, and she uses a brace and two canes to navigate campus.

She hopes that sharing her experiences will provide insight on the small things that can make a big difference in the lives of those with disabilities.

"This is ... just to raise awareness to the importance of making everywhere handicapped accessible," she said in an interview, "specifically Winchester, since we're in Winchester, starting with Shenandoah since I'm currently at Shenandoah and living through the little things."

Compliance vs. needs

SU has a high ADA — or Americans with Disabilities Act — compliance rating, meaning the campus meets federal standards and follows federal regulations regarding accessibility.

But despite being relatively comprehensive, the ADA is not a catch-all.

In a recent interview, Holli Phillips, SU's assistant dean of access and support, said, "Just because something meets compliance doesn't mean that it's enough."

For example, Pelish pointed out a handicapped parking space outside of SU's Halpin-Harrison Hall (HHH). While the space is reserved for those with handicapped passes, it's sandwiched between two regular parking spaces, which makes it more difficult for her to exit her vehicle.

"I have a hard time getting out because I need to make sure that my door does not hit the car beside me," she said. "And for my legs ... I have a brace, and they stretch out, so I need my door open as wide as it can go."

She's also faced issues down the hill from HHH at Davis Hall. While there are two handicapped spaces there, only one leads directly to a ramp onto the sidewalk. A temporary ramp has been set up for Pelish next to the farther away space in case she has to park there, though she noted that it likely wouldn't be wide enough for a wheelchair user to access.

Pelish also said that the Wilkins Administration Building has proved near-impossible for her to navigate on her own because "there's little stairs to get to the different places" inside.

All of these sites have made Pelish's life more difficult, yet they all meet ADA standards.

"There's just little things," she said. "It's never a ton of stuff with one place. It's one little thing here needs to be changed or tweaked, another thing here needs to be tweaked."

Phillips said that this feedback, in many ways, mirrors the findings of the focus groups she facilitated about a year ago. The goal was to uncover just what Pelish shared: the small things that, while not accounted for by regulations, still present potential challenges for students and university staff with disabilities.

Commentary included an assertion that round doorknobs are not accessible. Push button doors, some respondents reported, don't always work, and students aren't typically aware of the process for submitting a request to fix them. A faculty member noted that they'd heard frequent concerns regarding cross contamination in the dining hall, which makes it difficult or impossible for students with food allergies to eat there.

The hardships of self-advocacy

Phillips said that when students come forward with concerns, SU makes an effort to fix them. In fact, the focus groups were, in large part, intended to identify places on campus where further accessibility work can be done.

But she also acknowledged that the responsibility of having to self-disclose a disability on a college campus, per the ADA, can be a source of frustration for students.

"K through 12, the onus is on the school to recognize the disability ... to be proactive for it," Phillips said. "When you get into college, legally, the onus switches to the student, which is great because it builds advocacy skills and it builds like the techniques that they can use, hopefully in their workplace, to make sure they get the accommodations there, but it means they have to come forward, and it's not fair, right?"

Students already have to figure out how to navigate college life with their disability, she said, which means finding work-arounds for those small obstacles that people without disabilities might not even notice.

"So you've already got to figure out those little things in every new situation you're in," Phillips said, "and now to get it changed, you've got to be the one who speaks up."

Pelish ran into this frustration earlier in the semester, when she arrived for a class at Henkel Hall to find a tent blocking two of the four available handicapped parking spaces in the lot she typically uses. If the two remaining spaces were taken, Pelish said she had nowhere to park because while she's allowed to park in any handicapped space with her pass, the rest of that particular lot is reserved for faculty, and parking in the student lot isn't a viable option for her due to distance.

"I had to attend my class via Zoom, which I'm fine with here and there because, like, sometimes you don't feel good ... or for me, I've had my brace break, and I have to get it fixed. ... But when I just don't have a parking spot because of something that the school is doing, that's a little frustrating, especially when I'm paying for in-person classes."

The tent was placed in that particular parking lot due to a lack of space in the Allen Dining Hall at the beginning of the fall semester. At the time, it was the only place to eat on campus, and it was becoming overly crowded on a regular basis. Phillips explained that the tent had to be positioned in that way or else it would have, essentially, blocked the entire parking lot.

Once notified of Pelish's predicament, the university put temporary handicapped markers on more spots in the lot. The tent came down around mid-September.

"Again," Phillips said when asked about the tent blocking the handicapped spaces, "this is where awareness and privilege lives."

Awareness and improvements

Pelish said that generally, SU does a good job in terms of accessibility.

"I'm not going to sit here and complain about everything," she said, "because there are plenty of things ... that I'm grateful for," but said they need to "up it just a little bit."

And at any given time, it seems that there are ongoing efforts to close some of the accessibility gaps on campus which the ADA leaves open.

Phillips said that additional handicapped parking was added in front of Ruebush Hall after it was indicated that the ADA ratio of regular-to-handicapped spaces wasn't sufficient for that location. The university also added more handicapped spaces outside of HHH when it became clear that many people weren't aware of the accessible parking in the garage below the building.

They've added more push-button doors and adjusted door pressure around campus. They've made sure that there's braille in all elevators after a student with a visual impairment reported that there was not.

Phillips also said that there's ongoing work surrounding the culture of disability awareness on campus. While she sees that the stigma surrounding both physical and mental disabilities has improved over the years, she said she still comes across students who fear coming forward and asking for help or accommodations for fear of being viewed differently, which the university tries to combat.

Pelish, for her part, says she hopes that being open about her day-to-day struggles will improve things on campus not only for herself, but for other students with disabilities who might not be comfortable speaking up.

"Students should be able to get the most out of their education and their college experience with little to no difficulty," she said. "If they're gonna struggle with anything, it should be the classes, not the accessibility of the campus."

The bigger picture

Charles Harbaugh, executive director of the Winchester-based nonprofit Access Independence, said that being proactive and making efforts to go above and beyond ADA standards, which he described as a baseline, is a way to mitigate the burden placed on those with disabilities when it comes to making places more accessible.

"There is frustration, and I think it's a great opportunity for all of us to look in the mirror and think how we can make our businesses, our nonprofits, our government places, how can we make them more accessible?" he said in a recent interview.

Access Independence offers a host of resources for people with disabilities, like peer mentoring, help obtaining equipment like wheelchairs or ramps, help building independent living skills and help applying for Medicaid waiver services.

Harbaugh noted that Access Independence also conducts free accessibility reviews, meaning himself or another employee will come out to assess a site and make suggestions that might make it more accessible.

"There's low hanging fruit," he said. "There's affordable options for people to make their business accessible without breaking the bank. So, you know, even if it's a two-story house, and you can't put a stair lift into the business upstairs ... maybe you can make the bottom accessible and add grab bars at an electric door. You know, I just think knowledge is power in these instances."

Harbaugh also pointed out that the United States is home to an increasingly aging population, which could continue to increase the need for widespread accessibility. A [report from the U.S. Census Bureau](#) last year found that between 2010 and 2020, the population of Americans over age 65 grew at the fastest rate since 1880 to 1890. In 2020, 55.8 million people were in that age group, making up 16.8% of the country's overall population.

"My buddy, Chris Mitchell ... He's got a great quote. I wish I would have coined it," Harbaugh said. "But if we're all lucky enough to live long enough, we're going to acquire a disability."

And when it comes to doing business, Harbaugh said that being accessible can truly be an asset when it comes to attracting customers.

"If you're known as the best, most accessible brewery, you know, the most accessible winery ... it's going to be great for your bottom line. ... People are going to have their meetings there, or their social get-togethers. It's great for that," he said.

Pelish agreed. While she said some of the older parts of Winchester are more difficult for her to navigate, she gave at least one Old Town eatery a positive accessibility review.

"Macado's, that restaurant is great," she said. "Like, it's an old building, but it's handicapped accessible because it has a ramp around the back, and it has big, massive bathrooms that you can fit into ... A whole party could fit in there. ... And so that is an example of something that I will attest to. Like, that's a great restaurant."

Pelish also said that in general, seeing a place that goes beyond ADA standards "speaks a lot louder than what some people might think."

"Us people that are disabled ... when we see somebody go above and beyond, it shows the kind of people they are," she said. "And that makes us remember that, and that makes us want to come back, or it makes us want to refer our friends to that."

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