

Viewing campus through blind eyes

BY BETHANY COURY
Staff Reporter

Junior Sierra Gregg's world is a blurry one, but she never has known anything different.

Born without irises, a genetic condition called Aniridia, Gregg is one of four visually impaired Truman State students who is registered with the Disability Services. For these students, schoolwork is a much more time-intensive process, and navigating campus, let alone Kirksville, can be a challenge. However, Gregg said that with the professors' accommodations and the aid of the Disability Services Offices, she's able to work toward achieving her passion — becoming a librarian.

Gregg said that with Aniridia she's able to see shapes and colors, but details are obscure and her eyes are sensitive to light. Trying to read normally sized text for an extended period of time gives her extreme headaches, she said, so she emails professors when she enrolls, requesting large-print assignments and exams. She reiterates this request in person on the first day.

"You have to be very good at self-advocating when you're visually impaired, especially in college," Gregg said. "You need to find out what you need and how you need it so that you can tell the teachers in a way that they'll understand."

Gregg said navigating campus has been another challenge a she's had to proactively advocate for herself. The summer before coming to Truman, she and her mother self-toured campus extensively to get a feel for where things are.

Before classes begin each semester, she locates her classrooms so she knows where she is going when classes begin and the halls become "busy and crowded." She uses a white cane when she walks to avoid obstacles and to warn cars she might not see them. Gregg said she rarely goes off campus.

"I'll never be able to drive a car or do anything else [like that]," Gregg said. "But I don't know what I'm missing, so I can't miss it."

Gregg said that when she was born, the doctor said she wouldn't be able to read, see color or go to school. She was placed in a school for the blind in Utah, which taught life skills, not academics. In kindergarten, the teachers discovered she had an aptitude for academics, she said. She went to public school, was homeschooled and went to a private high school.

It was at home where she fell in love with books. She said her dad would tell her bedtime stories when she was a child and when his imagination ran dry, he began reading books to her. When she wanted more than the few chapters he would read each night, she turned to audio books.

"Ever since then I've always had an audio book with me, and I don't know what I'd do without the audio book because I love the story, I love the — maybe the escape, I don't know," Gregg said. "It's my passion and what I really like to do."

Gregg said her computer science major is difficult for a visually impaired student, however, she said it's a good road to take in undergraduate school because libraries are becoming more digital. She said even though it's tough, it'll help her go to graduate school for library sciences, and she's glad to be able to work toward her passion.

Disability Services Coordinator Vicky Wehner said visually impaired students' success dependent on their attitude. She said she always is in awe of all her students, but especially of students with visual impairments.

"It always amazes me how quick they are to adapt, to get the information they need, to be successful in their classes," Wehner said.

The Disability Services Office does what it can to help visually

impaired students succeed, she said, which include making three-dimensional graphs, especially useful for science classes, and three-dimensional maps for helping the students become familiar with campus. They use different textures for different surfaces, such as concrete and brick.

The office is able to unbind books and convert textbooks not already offered in an audio format into Word documents with their high-speed scanner. The students then can read on their computer with a screen-reader, a computer application that reads text on the screen. The office is not able to unbind library books, so student workers have to scan the texts page-by-page, which is a more time-consuming process.

Senior Casey Lynn, who has been blind since birth, is able to listen to his screen-reading software, JAWS, at a speed so fast it sounds unintelligible to the untrained ear. He said he's able to listen to a 300-400 page book in a few hours.

Lynn said that because books aren't readily available to him he has to make sure he manages his time well. For example, with a research paper due in a month and half, he knows he has to find his materials immediately, so they can be converted in time for him to research.

He said navigating campus potentially is the biggest issue. He walks with a trained dog, Todo, who helps him navigate routes and avoid cars, Lynn said. Lynn said he's become lost during the past, especially his first year at Truman.

"Learning the campus was fun," Lynn said. "I definitely accidentally fell into the Sunken Garden at one point. I just remember memorizing my way around, trying to learn different rooms, different buildings, obviously. My freshman year was definitely ... an exploration year, as it is I think for most Truman students."



Lindsey Borgna/Index
Senior Casey Lynn navigates campus with his seeing eye dog, Todo. Lynn has been blind since birth.

K-Life tournament puts values into play

BY KATHLEEN BARBOSA
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Fun and faith met in a frenzy of flying balls during K-Life's annual dodgeball tournament Saturday.

K-Life's tournament was both a fundraiser and an opportunity for children to practice the values their role models, Truman State student volunteers, try to instill in them.

Andrew Gooch, an 11-year-old K-Life member, competed in the tournament with four of his friends. Gooch said his team placed second, but for him the tournament was more about putting into practice the values he learns at K-Life.

"They can combine having fun and being active with the Lord and all He does for us," Gooch said. "They teach us what you need to act like using the Lord and I learn a lot from them."

Kevin Hudson, Kirksville's K-Life area director, said every year, children are asked to play with integrity volunteers try to teach them. Putting these skills into practice is one of the reasons they choose to have the dodgeball tournament every year, he said.

Hudson said the volunteers running the tournament are asked to carry themselves in a way that creates an atmosphere that focuses on fun rather than making the tournament about winning. Competitors who dressed up helped amplify the fellowship spirit, Hudson said.

The biggest duty of K-Life volunteers, Hudson said, is to serve as role models



Kathleen Barbosa/Index
Andrew Gooch throws a dodgeball during K-Life's dodgeball tournament Nov. 5. Gooch said the tournament is a chance to use the values he learns at K-Life.

for the younger members of the organization. Everyone from Hudson to the Truman student volunteers are asked

to live a life that follows Christian principles, and Hudson said one of the most influential groups are the college-age

volunteers, such as senior Brock Mashburn.

As a K-Life intern, Mashburn said his job is to set an example for children. He lives in the K-Life house, which he said means he constantly is setting an example for visitors at the house during the week for Bible study groups. It also means serving as a mentor for students is his life, he said he considers being a role model to be the most important part of his job, he said.

"I have to live what I tell them because to live otherwise makes me a hypocrite," Mashburn said.

By leading a small group Bible study of high school junior boys, Mashburn said he gets to create close relationships with his group, share his beliefs and impact those who attend K-Life.

Aside from the dodgeball tournament, K-Life opens its doors to area children three times a week for small-group Bible studies. They also plan activities for K-Life club, which Hudson said is similar to a youth group. These meetings and activities are designed to incorporate fun activities and religious teachings K-Life hopes children and young adults will learn from, Hudson said. This also is the time for the 21 groups, led almost entirely by college student volunteers such as Mashburn, to create a positive influence for K-Life members, Hudson said.

"It's fun to be in a position that influences people's lives and you get to see your life being influenced by the people you're trying to influence," Hudson said. "It's a very humbling experience."

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