

LIFESTYLES

The legend of Toby: one class at a time for 13 years

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BY **KARA SPAK** Staff Reporter

Toby Williams knows what people think when they see him in his wheelchair, hear his slow speech, notice how his eyes don't move together.

"It's there, it's always there, it will continue to be there," he said of assumptions that he is less capable because he has cerebral palsy. "I expect it."

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Toby Williams will accept a master's degree from Northeastern Illinois University on Saturday.

(Brian Jackson/Sun-Times)

But he doesn't accept it.

"I enjoy proving people wrong," he said.

On Saturday, the 30-year-old Englewood man once again will prove himself when he accepts a master's degree in communications, media and theater from Northeastern Illinois University. He has been enrolled as a student there for 13 years.

"I enjoyed meeting the challenge," he said. "It might take me a couple of years, but eventually I'll beat the challenge."

Cerebral palsy is a neurological disorder that manifests in infancy or early childhood. His brain is unable to control his muscles.

For his first 20 years, he went to therapy -- physical, speech, occupational -- for hours after school. He underwent three surgeries.

In 1997, as a senior at Spaulding School, a Chicago Public School for students with disabilities, he was recruited to Northeastern as part of a grant program to help disabled students move to college-level classes. He started there weeks after high school graduation.

"He liked it, and in the fall he came back for the term," said Victoria Amey-Flippin, director of Northeastern's accessibility center.

He returned semester after semester. For 13 years, Williams has been a campus legend, eating in the cafeteria, working as a graduate assistant for Amey-Flippin and studying for a bachelor's degree, which he received in 2004, and now his master's degree.

His typical day starts when a wheelchair-accessible van takes him about 20 miles to campus from his South Side home, dropping him off at 9 a.m. He often stays on campus until 8 p.m.

He can't control his hands enough to take notes, so he records classes on a tape recorder. He types 30-page papers with his index fingers. His other fingers "don't work right," he said.

He receives extra time for tests, which he takes in the accessibility center where he works. He answers the same questions as the other students, but an employee types the answers for him. Though he gets extra time for the tests, he must complete classes in the same time frame as other students, so he often didn't take a full course load during a semester.

"He has a tremendous memory," said Cody Sweet, who taught Williams voice and diction courses in 2003 and 2004. "He has to take all the verbiage into his brain and he has to organize it, put it in little pigeonholes in his brain."

Thanks to an outgoing personality and his long tenure at the school, he's known by students and faculty throughout the Northwest Side campus. While he said he's ready to move on, those who are used to seeing him day after day are not quite as sure.

"I find myself getting a little choked up," Amey-Flippin said. "It really did seem strange to go through the cafeteria and not see him up in the front."

Williams gradually has been spending less time on campus because of an internship at American Street Mortgage Co., where he works with a former classmate who specializes in mortgage loans for veterans. He is hoping to eventually obtain a state mortgage broker's license. "It's time to start working and make some money," he said.

He knows that even with a master's degree, he is entering the job market in a shaky economy. He remains undeterred.

"My mom always told me there will always be people who don't think you can do it," he said. "Don't listen to them. Focus on what you're trying to do, keep praying to God and focus. Eventually you'll get there."