

January 27, 2010

To the Members of the Southeastern Association of Housing Officers Awards Selection Committee:

It's my privilege to commend the UWG Housing and Residence Life staff for the inspiring manner in which they responded to a severely disabled student at a very dark time in her life and turned a disciplinary challenge into the epitome of a teachable, empowering process. In this case, a fiercely independent wheelchair bound young resident who was battling an increasing loss of body control had been afraid to request help for fear she would be sent home. Having grown up in a very abusive and neglectful home, she could not face that alternative, so she told no one that her residence hall room, including clothing, bedding, and carpeting, was contaminated with fecal matter and urine. She told no one that she could no longer make the needed transitions from her wheelchair to her bed, shower, and toilet without falling. With the exception of attending class she self isolated allowing no one in her room for fear of discovery. When the problem was discovered by Residence Life staff, the young woman was devastated, humiliated, and terrified. Most of her belongings had to be disposed of and the room had to be decontaminated by a professional restoration service at a cost of approximately \$2200. Due to the extent of the damage to the room and furnishings the student could have been removed from housing privileges. However, our Residence Life staff chose to respond as educators, and the events that transpired were incredibly moving and inspiring. They coordinated services with the Office of Disabilities and Health Services to accurately assess the student's changing medical needs. They quickly selected a residence hall with a beautiful room and modified it to make it compatible with the most recent needs assessment. Knowing she had lost her belongings, they went far beyond the basics and personalized the room with many comforts and made her welcome, treating her always with respect and dignity.

As I mentioned previously, this is indeed a proud and independent young woman who overcame so much just to attend the university. Having come from a family who did not understand her disability, she was often left alone and was forced to crawl on the floor. She was the subject of ridicule and abuse. She had no income and no transportation, so finances were always a challenge. She battles a degenerative disease and understandably chronic depression. I've seen her on campus soaking wet in pouring rain rolling to classes even though her hands cannot support an umbrella. Yet, she goes because she so values her education.

Not surprisingly, the student wanted to assume responsibility for the cost incurred in the restoration of her original room. Knowing the cost was more than she could reasonably pay, yet understanding the empowerment that could be gained through her contribution, the Residence Life staff ingeniously

created a job for her in her own residence hall. The job not only enabled her to pay for the damages, but to have an income of her own. More importantly, the job at the main desk in the lobby gave her purpose - and an avenue to make friends in her new residence hall as she answered questions and provided direction to her peers. When I saw her right before Christmas break, she was beautiful and confident. It was one of those encounters we relish as educators when we see the power of those teachable moments. I will never forget her words that day, "Ms. Jill, it will be hard going to my parents' house during break, but I can get through it this time because I get to come home in January. I learned the people here really care about me, and I have a home here". Our Housing and Residence Life staff is to be commended for successfully creating a beautiful welcoming home for this young woman at such an especially dark time in her life. They truly made a difference.

Sincerely,


Jill Hendricks, Ed.S.
Patient Advocate