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U. of I. opens state-of-the-art dorm for students with disabilities

Facility marks new milestone for university, already a leader in disability services



Kelsey Rozema, right, jokes with her mother, Mary, while moving into her room in Nugent Hall, the University of Illinois' new dorm for students with physical disabilities. (Lane Christiansen, Chicago Tribune / August 16, 2010)

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By Jodi S. Cohen, Tribune reporter

10:05 p.m. CDT, August 18, 2010

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CHAMPAIGN — With very limited use of her arms and legs, Kelsey Rozema has needed her parents' help with most daily tasks — getting out of bed, showering, putting on a coat and even opening a water bottle. In 18 years, they've been apart

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So moving into a college dorm this week — and away from the reliance on her family — is even more of a milestone for Rozema than for the thousands of other wide-eyed freshmen arriving this week at the [University of Illinois](#), a ritual that will be repeated on college campuses throughout the country in coming weeks.

It helped that she moved into the university's first new residence hall in 44 years and the most user-friendly dorm in the country for students with severe physical disabilities. As Rozema wheeled into her single room for the first time Tuesday, a disability advocate showed off the features: a wireless pager that will call for help 24 hours a day and a remote-controlled ceiling lift system to transport her from her bed to the in-room bathroom.

"That's cool, Kelsey. You will be sailing through here," said her mother, Mary, taking a break from carefully tucking orange and turquoise sheets into her daughter's bed. After several tries, she gave up on getting a dust ruffle to fit on the hospital-style bed.

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As much as moving into Nugent Hall was a remarkable accomplishment for Rozema, it also was momentous for the U. of I. Already recognized as a front-runner in disability services for students, the U. of I. dorm will allow students with the most severe disabilities — all use motorized wheelchairs or scooters — to get the personalized care they need while being integrated with typical students.

They will live on the first floor, with about 150 other students on the floors above them, a number that will expand to 500 when the dorm is completed in two years. The building is connected to a new dining hall, convenience store and meeting spaces.

Down the hall from Rozema, Ben Fultz, 21, a transfer student with [cerebral palsy](#), also moved in Tuesday. His mother, Ellen, was overwhelmed by the features, remarking how even the window blinds can be closed with a button. "It is truly better than what we have at home," she said.

The sinks, thermostats and light switches are at an accessible height. Dorm room doors open by waving a wireless card. Faucets are sensor-activated. And the roll-in showers come with chairs.

But most unique are the personal assistants, known as PAs, who live in the building to help students shower, use the bathroom and hook backpacks on their wheelchairs before leaving for class. Most are U. of I. students. After the Rozemas accidentally hit the pager while putting away books Tuesday, a PA arrived in under two minutes. "Did you buzz?" she asked.

Through the program, residents learn how to hire, schedule and manage their PAs. In a newsletter last year about the life-changing program, one resident observed that students could have conversations like, "Which PA wipes the best after you use the bathroom?"

All of the features make Mary Rozema feel slightly more at ease about being separated from her only child.

"My worst fear as a mom is, what if she is just lying there and needs help?" she said.

Kelsey Rozema acknowledged having some last-minute anxiety before leaving southwest suburban New Lenox for Champaign. "I wasn't worried until last night, and I was like, 'I am leaving home. I am leaving my parents,'" said Rozema, who plans to major in English and art history.

In all, 17 students with severe physical disabilities will live this year on the first floor of the new hall, named for Tim Nugent, who in 1948 founded the university's division of disability services, the first higher education program of its kind in the world.

"It is a remarkable statement about the commitment of this campus to ensure that those who are most marginalized in their access, if they have the desire and the capacity and the willingness to pursue a degree ... Illinois is committed to making that a reality," said Brad Hedrick, director of the university's disability services.

The opening of the dorm continues the U. of I.'s legacy of making college accessible: It was the first college to introduce curb cuts, offer bus routes equipped with wheelchair lifts and have a wheelchair sports program.

There are only about five U.S. colleges that offer some kind of personal assistant services, and until now, U. of I. students with severe disabilities lived in a stand-alone facility called Beckwith Hall.

Students at other colleges hire assistants through a private agency — or stay close to home for school.

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Most campuses set aside dorm space for students who use wheelchairs or have significant disabilities, similar to a hotel, said Richard Allegra of the Association on Higher Education and Disability.

Allegra called the U. of I.'s program "a rare concept."

Students get five hours of PA help a day and can schedule the hours around their classes and social life.

That will be a change for Fultz, who previously studied at the University of Rochester. He said it was difficult to find an assistant willing to help him get to bed after 9 p.m. The aides were more accustomed to the schedules of elderly clients than college students.

U. of I. students pay the standard \$11,000 for room and board, and then about \$18,000 for the support services. Costs may be covered through the state's vocational rehabilitation program.

Kelsey Rozema said she will rotate between about a half-dozen personal assistants who she scheduled to help with bathroom breaks, showering and getting in and out of bed. The goal is for students to learn independent living skills and transition to more mainstream housing, whether on a higher floor, in a different dorm or to an apartment.

Born with a rare brittle bone disease, Rozema has had more than 300 fractures in her life, starting with a femur fracture in utero. She speaks nonchalantly about the broken bones — "just a couple of **broken ribs** in the last couple of months" — but she also packed codeine because the pain from just moving out of her wheelchair can be hard to bear.

After spending the morning unpacking, the Rozemas went to the adjacent dining hall, where the fountain drink station is at a height Kelsey can reach. Out of routine, Mary began pouring soup into her bowl before realizing it was at an accessible height.

"Here, get your own soup," she said.

The family then sat down to eat. After focusing all morning on arranging Kelsey's books, clothes, makeup and posters in her room, Mary unexpectedly became overwhelmed with emotion as she looked to her daughter.

"I promised I wouldn't do it," she said, putting a napkin up to her nose and **mouth** and looking away to stifle the tears.

"Don't make me cry," Kelsey said.

Her mom couldn't help it and turned back to Kelsey. "This is what I always dreamed of, for you to one day go to college. I am so proud of you."

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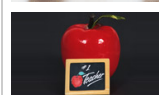


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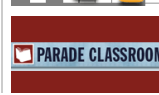
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