



Ralph Allen School

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A day in a wheelchair

I was challenged by Kate in year 9 to spend the day in a wheelchair to gain greater perspective on how it feels.

At first, I could not even manoeuvre the chair to turn to my desk. I then found that my legs would not fit under my desk and had to adjust it. Spending time in my office working provided no extra challenges but at break I needed to go on duty.

I left a little early, which was the right decision, and made my way to the field. Leaving my office took careful negotiation. Normal doors are wide enough for wheelchairs but only just. The additional width of my hands and arms only just fit and care is needed to not catch them.



The gentle slope to the field meant the wheelchair gained speed and my hands had to provide friction to slow my acceleration. Note to self here to wear gloves. Students stopped to stare and some enquired if I was okay.

I then tried to move across the path at the top of the field. It has a slight incline which I do not normally notice. I did today. This was the first workout for my arms. Thirty paces later my arms were on fire. Mr Paisley asked if he could help as I approached the next hill. I quickly said yes, and he pushed me up the hill. He did make a reference to my size as we traversed the slope.

I waited until all students had left for classes before I attempted to return to my office. This again was slightly uphill and took me 6 or 7 minutes longer than it usually does. I also had to stop twice so my arms did not melt through my shirt. Luckily, I had work to do in my office so my arms could recover. With more practice during the day my manoeuvring skills developed.

I did use the disabled toilets, but I am not going to expand on that.

What I did find interesting was how people reacted to me. Yes, everyone did stare but who would not at their headteacher moving around in a wheelchair. In discussion with people and in my own observations people did not know what to do. They weren't sure whether to offer help or treat me as they normally would.



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What did I learn from the experience?

It is not easy being in a wheelchair, physically and mentally. There were times when I felt isolated and left to struggle on my own. People do not always know how to react. The answer to this is the same way as you do with everyone. Ask the person if they want help - they will let you know.

It is also very demanding on the upper body. My arms did hurt at the end of the day. The school is fully accessible but even regulation slopes are hard work.

Thank you, Kate, for challenging me it was an experience I will not forget. It gave me some insight, but I only had to do this for one day. Being in a wheelchair every day is tough. There would be lots of days

when I would be upset. I have nothing but admiration for anyone who spends any amount of time in a wheelchair and would encourage those around them to offer help and empathy.



Andy Greenhough

Headteacher

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