

Tulane freshman with muscular dystrophy finds joy and fulfillment on campus

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Tulane freshman Oliver Scheier says he doesn't let muscular dystrophy stop him from having a fulfilling college experience. (Photo by Sabree Hill)

When Tulane University freshman Oliver Scheier and his parents began exploring colleges two years ago, high up on their list of criteria were the usual — academics, social life, campus feel, class size and housing.

Topping the list was accessibility. Born with muscular dystrophy, a group of genetic diseases that cause progressive weakness and loss of muscle mass, Oliver would

need a school where he could navigate campus with relative ease. That would mean doors through which his mobility scooter could pass, accessible restrooms and buildings with elevators and ramps.

Campus culture was equally important. Does the school have a positive attitude toward diversity and disability? Is it a place that offers a supportive and inclusive community, one where Oliver could thrive on his own?

Beginning in his junior year in high school, Oliver and his parents, who are from New Jersey, began exploring the possibilities. Oliver wanted to go out west, convinced that he would be fine anywhere. But his mother, Mindy Scheier, who Oliver describes as a genius, knew that in her son's case choosing a college was not so simple.

"She did the research on what she knew I wanted as well as what I needed — things that I never even considered," Oliver said. "She saw that Tulane was one of the best in the country. So, we came down to look. Once I got on campus, I knew I didn't want to go anywhere else but Tulane."

Mindy Scheier described the college search as an eye-opening yet disappointing experience, with some schools not even offering golf cart tours.

"As a parent, I was looking at the openness of the university and how they think, and how they approach students who are not typical," said Scheier, founder and CEO of the Runway of Dreams Foundation, which works to give people with disabilities access to fashion that empowers them.

"Tulane checked every single box. They could not have done more to make Oliver feel comfortable, from allowing him to move in a few days before everyone else to renovating his bathroom."

That work was done through the Goldman Center for Student Accessibility. Director Dario Bayardo worked with Oliver to ensure a fully accessible, inclusive academic, housing and dining environment.

"I thoroughly enjoyed working with Oliver and his parents to identify his needs and explore all possible options for support," Bayardo said. "Whenever a student requests support from Goldman, we engage in an interactive process that includes the student clarifying their lived experience, gathering information and recommendations from their evaluators, and collaborating with campus partners to

confirm and coordinate the accommodations. No two students are the same, so being understanding and creative is key.”

Oliver said Bayardo and his staff have gone out of their way to make Tulane feel like home. “They’ve been so attentive and there for me. I have Dario’s phone number in my cell phone, and I can text him at any time. I feel very supported.”

With his first semester behind him, Oliver could not be happier with his college choice. He loves his classes, especially digital media practices, intro to cinema and acting. He enjoys hanging out with friends, watching movies and listening to music. He even joined the Juggling Club, which meets once a week on the top floor of Diboll Garage.

“It’s honestly magical,” he said of the club. “There are about 30 of us. We juggle pins or balls, and I feel like I’m connecting with my inner child. I really love it.”

Oliver lives on the first floor of Wall Residence Hall on McAlister Way, where he has made many friends, including his roommate Luke Rubin. Admittedly, he was concerned about what kind of roommate he’d have, but he says he lucked out with Luke.

“He’s a really cool guy,” Oliver said. “At first, I thought we would just coexist. I didn’t know if our personalities would align to the point of friendship. But we started talking, and ever since then, we’ve been friends.”

As much as Oliver has enjoyed his Tulane experience, there have been challenges. Adjusting to his scooter was one challenge. “I had never had a scooter,” he said. “But there was no way I could walk the long distances (on campus) without it.”

Oliver is enjoying his independence, and he is quick to credit his mother with instilling in him a can-do attitude from a young age. “My mom and I agreed that while disability is crucial to my identity, it is not everything. At the end of the day, I am Oliver.”



Tulane freshman Oliver Scheier, center, hangs out with friends Sam Lupo Harris, left, and Noah Fincheltub on McAlister Way. (Photo by Sabree Hill)

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