

elizabeth fields:

Living with disability, finding a place to belong



Elizabeth Fields joins the "signing choir" in interpreting a song for Wednesday-night worship.

The students hover over Elizabeth Fields – cutting up her food, bringing her pie, helping her to the restroom. When it's announced that the sign-language choir will lead the first song of Wednesday-night worship, Fields laboriously navigates her wheelchair from dinner table to the front of the fellowship hall.



It takes a while for her to make her way, but the choir waits patiently. Elizabeth is one of them.

Born with cerebral palsy, Fields is now 21. She is a student at Radford University in Wytheville District and a member of the Wesley Foundation faith community.

Six to seven of the students have the closest relationships with Fields, says Foundation Director Martee Buchanan, but nearly all of the 40 to 50 "regulars" help or interact with her in some way. The students often serve as backups

for her four personal assistants, helping her eat and get back and forth to Wesley activities. Two of the students, along with Martee Buchanan, are designated drivers of Fields' specially-equipped van.

"They're a wonderfully supportive group," Fields says of her Wesley friends.

A member of Mt. Pleasant United Methodist Church in Wytheville, Fields was first encouraged to participate in the Wesley Foundation by her pastor, the Rev. Joe Mack Taylor. At the time, she was a transfer student from Wytheville Community College, nervous about attending Radford.

"I excelled at community college, but I didn't know about a university because I didn't want to put too much on my plate," she says.

Over the years, Fields has learned to pace herself. Her motor

skills are more developed than they were in her childhood years, but she realizes she's "at the limit" of what she will ever be able to do. She needs assistance to do nearly every physical task

That never stopped her from pursuing her love of languages. "When I was little, I had a lot of surgeries," she explains, referring to 10 operations on her hips, hamstrings, and back. "Once, when I was crying and screaming with the pain, a therapist taught me how to count to 10 in Spanish. That got to be too easy for me, so I learned to count further, then started learning the words."

Today, Fields majors in Spanish, minors in French. She expects to graduate in fall 2007 and work as a translator. "I would rather be a creative author but I can make more money as a translator," she says. Her mother is a janitor at Mount Pleasant UMC; her father is a truck driver.

Living a half-block from the Wesley Foundation, Fields has become a devoted participant in activities that include a Wednesday-night dinner and program, Saturday-night restaurant meal, Sunday-morning worship at Grove United Methodist Church, and Sunday-night movies. Her friends reach out to her emotionally as well as physically.

"I try to instill my positive attitude whenever I'm around her," says Matt Shelor, who also suffers from cerebral palsy but uses a walker. A Baptist by faith, he began participating in Wesley activities last year at Fields' invitation. "It's the people here, who welcome you with open arms, that keep me coming back."

Proud of her students, Buchanan tells of how they rushed to check on Fields during a fire drill, how they gained insight into her challenges by having their arms bound and using wheelchairs on "Disability Awareness Night."

Fields tells of the grief she experienced after her grandmother's recent death, and how a Wesley student saw her pain, came to her, and gave her a hug.

"I'm sorry," said the student. "I love you, and God loves you." ■

Life at the WF



Location: 1022 Downey Street, Radford, VA 24141-2620

Director: Martee Buchanan

High attendance: 50 for Thanksgiving dinner

Core group: 40-50 students participate in "Wesley Wednesday" (dinner and a program)

Wish list: A \$20 donation will buy snacks for Tuesday and Thursday afternoon tutoring sessions for children in grades K-2, led by Wesley students

Web site: www.radford.edu/weslyfdn/

Phone: (540) 639-4415