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## Determined Students Share Their Struggles, Triumphs in PhotoVoice

Winthrop University

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# Determined Students Share Their Struggles, Triumphs in PhotoVoice

## Quick Facts

- PhotoVoice is on display through October in 114 DiGiorgio Campus Center.
- Hilburn is an English major from Greenville, South Carolina.
- Anita Harris is an integrated marketing communication major from Lancaster, South Carolina.



*Laurie Hilburn at Universal Studios*

ROCK HILL, SOUTH CAROLINA – Three things hang from the rearview mirror of **Laurie Hilburn's** car: a Wonder Woman necklace, a Batman sticker and her handicapped tag.

Hilburn, a Winthrop University English major from Greenville, South Carolina, took a photo of that tag for **PhotoVoice**, currently on exhibition in **114 DiGiorgio Campus Center** through the end of October.

The **Office of Disability Services (ODS)** at Winthrop is celebrating the 25th anniversary of the **Americans With Disabilities Act**, a broad civil rights law that forbids discriminating against anyone based on his or her disability, with several events, including PhotoVoice. October also represents **National Disability Employment Awareness Month**.



*Anita Harris in Guatemala*

ODS' PhotoVoice exhibition features photos taken by Winthrop students who identify as having a disability. The photos depict both the difficulties and triumphs in the photographers' lives with the hopes of opening people's eyes to the barriers they face.

Hilburn submitted two photos: one of her in front of the Hogwarts Express at Universal Studios, posing with the cane she needs to walk with; and the other of her handicapped car tag. While the Hogwarts photo represents a happy moment for her, the tag photo tells a different story.

A fellow resident at the apartment complex where Hilburn lives reported that Hilburn was falsely using the handicapped space.

"They probably saw me getting out of the car one day and assumed, 'She's too young to have a disability,'" she said. "There are a lot of misconceptions about students with disabilities."

While Hilburn said she has rarely experienced any direct confrontation, she recalled an instance she faced while flying to California to see her brother. Unable to walk and stand for the long distances between concourses, she requested a ride on one of the carts that transport people around the airport.

“As they’re driving through, they’re having people pushed aside,” she said. “As we drove by, I heard one woman say, ‘Oh, she’s not even disabled.’ I just held up my cane.”

“Always in the moment, you’re lost for words, but I’ve had a million conversations with her in my head since then.”

Hilburn hopes events like PhotoVoice will increase that conversation.

**“The better term would be ‘determined.’”**

In the seventh grade, doctors misdiagnosed Hilburn with a stomach illness. The actual cause for her sickness was a burst appendix. She contracted blood poisoning and spent the better part of the next year “down” and unable to do anything. She dropped to 80 pounds. Worse yet, the complications extended to her brain, resulting in a cyst, migraines and chronic pain.

In the end, Hilburn was diagnosed with an autoimmune disease, early rheumatoid arthritis and fibromyalgia. She walks with a cane and still experiences pain and low energy.

When asked if she was angry at the doctors or other people who misjudge her, she said no.

“I’m 24 now; I’ve been dealing with this for 10 years,” she said. “I don’t have time to be angry. The better term would be ‘determined.’”

Despite missing a lot of school and facing new struggles, Hilburn graduated with her high school class, attended Greenville Technical College and started at Winthrop for her English degree. She said her professors and the Office of Disability Services have been a huge help and very understanding.

In addition to her studies, she works as a writing tutor in the Writing Center and TRiO, a resume editor for the Center for Career and Civic Engagement, prose editor for The Anthology and chairwoman of marketing for Winthrop’s American Association of University Women.

“There are still bad days, but I’m able to, for the most part, keep up with everything I do,” she said.

**‘I was just raised to be an overcomer’**

Don’t tell **Anita Harris** she can’t do something.

The Lancaster, South Carolina, resident doesn’t let any obstacles stand in her way, including her legal blindness.

Harris was very young when she was diagnosed with retinoblastoma in the form of a tumor on her left eye. She underwent 31 days of radiation to save her right eye and eliminate the tumor. Doctors taught her strategies to look with one eye so that she could still see peripherally. She adapted quickly and found a new pleasure in reading.

But not too long after that, her reading was interrupted by black spots appearing in her vision.

“Some of my vision just left,” she said.

Harris’ vision has been corrected to 20/20, but was 20/80 throughout middle school. For her PhotoVoice submission, she submitted two entries, both showcasing the blurriness she sees while trying to learn. For example, in her international communications class, the integrated marketing major has difficulty making out the letters and country outlines on maps.

However, she is a good verbal learner, so she and her professor are working out a system to help her.

Asking for help wasn’t always so easy for her, Harris said.

“My mom always told me I wasn’t any different,” she explained. “She raised me to be independent... It was a very difficult transition because I hated asking for help. I valued my independence.”

She hopes the exhibit will raise awareness and show others what she and her peers struggle with on a daily basis.

Harris won't let any struggles keep her down. She and a group traveled to Guatemala two years ago with former Common Book Author Kelsey Timmerman. More recently, she spent eight days in Italy with the Mediterranean diet class. She's on track to graduate in May 2016 and wants to go into fashion merchandising.

"I was just raised to be an overcomer," Harris said. "I've always been ambitious, and I always think about the future. I always see greater things for myself....I can do all things through my faith. Even though obstacles come, I still push through."

For more information on the PhotoVoice exhibition, please contact Tina Vires at 803/323-3290 or [virest@winthrop.edu](mailto:virest@winthrop.edu).

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