

The Architecture of Perseverance

We often move through a world that seems accessible, until we meet someone who reminds us it isn't.

For me, that someone was Cheryl. I met her in my role as a volunteer student in the Neuropalliative Care clinic. At 64-years-old, she has lived with Multiple Sclerosis for nearly three decades. Once an architect and an avid terracotta clay hobbyist, Cheryl now finds her hands too numb and unsteady for the work she once loved.

“Cheryl has MS, and MS has Cheryl,” she says, describing how the illness has entwined itself with every part of her life. She explains it feels like she's watching the world move forward while she remains still. Even a simple lunch invitation from friends becomes complicated when she can't be sure if the restaurant has stairs, tight spaces, or a doorway her wheelchair can't fit through – often leading her to decline.

Yet in the face of these barriers, Cheryl redefines what independence looks like. She modified her car with spinner knobs and a Chair Topper that lifts her wheelchair into place. She installed a fingerprint door lock when holding and turning a physical key became difficult and found specialized MS shoes that let her glide with less friction when she drags her feet. Each adjustment taught me how she continued to design a life on her own terms. Every week, she attends an art class, her hands shape clay with a reinvented and more abstract technique compared to what her illness once threatened to take away.

Although Cheryl is able to overcome many physical obstacles, her mind wrestles with the weight of it all. And still, she chooses to work through it. With ketamine therapy, Cheryl was able to see that life isn't quite black and white, but instead there are shades of gray, spaces where

joy and MS can coexist. Having MS doesn't mean everyday will be a good day, but there can always be some good found in each day.

Despite living with a neurodegenerative disorder, Cheryl showed me that losing mobility didn't mean losing purpose. She still lives alone, drives her bright orange car, and never skips her Venti, decaf, nonfat, no whip, no foam, three pumps and three shots Mocha at Starbucks.

Volunteering with Cheryl shows me that caring for someone isn't only about managing their illness, but about understanding their world – the barriers, the adaptations, and the internal battles behind every day. As I move forward in my journey toward becoming a physician, I hope to carry that awareness with me: that the most meaningful medicine often happens in how we see, listen, and make space for patients to keep living on their own terms.

Madison Dougherty
Undergraduate Student, Neuroscience & Psychology
Student Volunteer, Neuropalliative Care Clinic
University of Rochester

Cheryl is a pseudonym that was assigned to the person referenced in this Blog to protect her privacy.