



# ACCESSIBILITY IN GREEKTOWN

While some fraternity and sorority houses have been updated, many remain inaccessible to students with physical disabilities.

BY ALANA SAAD

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In August, freshman Scarlett Hunter hit a bump in the road no one had prepared for.

It was the first day of formal sorority recruitment, and Scarlett was one of 1,987 women combatting the Missouri humidity in search of the perfect Greek chapter. Everything was going well — someone gave her a ride to the Missouri Theatre on a golf cart and even gave Scarlett her number in case she needed a ride again the next day. Scarlett visited half of the sorority houses throughout the day and headed home to Dogwood.

Scarlett, who uses a wheelchair, texted the woman with a golf cart the next morning to ask for a ride. “We’re not using the golf carts for that now,” she responded. “You’re just gonna have to take yourself over there.”

Scarlett called her Panhellenic Recruitment Counselor (“Pi Chi”) Carolyn Welter for help. Welter met Scarlett at Dogwood and walked her to Greektown for the second day of recruitment. When Scarlett arrived, she said she saw a girl on crutches getting a ride on one of the golf carts. “They lied to me and it really upset me,” Scarlett said. “I was like, ‘You’re the leaders, you’re supposed to be an example.’”

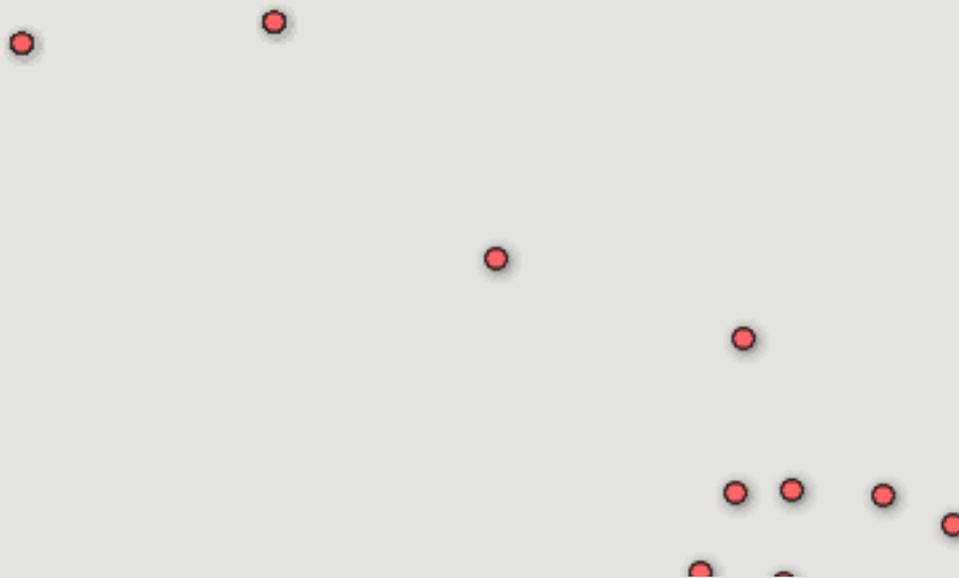
Later that morning, Scarlett’s wheelchair hit an elevated, uneven piece of the sidewalk and toppled over, leaving Scarlett lying on the pavement. Welter helped Scarlett get back in her chair, but the unwanted exposure left Scarlett embarrassed and vulnerable.

For many students, coming to MU is a new chapter of their lives. Socially, that's often literal — **more than a quarter of students** belong to a Greek chapter. For women, formal sorority recruitment (informally known as rush) takes place during the week before the first day of the fall semester. Women visit Panhellenic Association chapters to talk to current members and learn about each chapter in hopes of finding their ideal sorority. For Scarlett — and for many incoming freshmen — recruitment was her first taste of college.

Scarlett was inspired to join a sorority after family members and high school counselors convinced her it would be a great experience. She has used a wheelchair for most of her life — a car accident left her with a spinal cord injury when she was 4 years old. Having no idea how formal recruitment was going to be, Scarlett went into it with an open mind. It didn't take long for her to come face-to-face with the obstacles Greektown has for students with physical disabilities.

Click on the red points on the interactive graphic below to explore individual house's accessibility features.

## MAPPING ACCESSIBILITY



GREEK CHAPTERS WITH HOUSES WERE ASKED TO DESCRIBE THEIR HOUSE'S ACCESSIBILITY BASED ON FIVE METRICS: AN ACCESSIBLE FRONT DOOR, ACCESSIBLE SIDE ENTRANCES, FIRST-FLOOR BATHROOMS, FIRST-FLOOR BEDROOMS AND ELEVATORS. \*DELTA UPSILON'S HOUSE IS UNDER CONSTRUCTION. SOURCE: CHAPTER PRESIDENTS AND MEMBERS. GRAPHIC MADE BY: BEN KOTHE/GRAPHICS MANAGER

Students were prohibited from using the streets during recruitment, despite the poor conditions of the sidewalk. And after she fell out of her wheelchair, Scarlett constantly watched the sidewalk out of fear the incident would repeat itself.

But her problems weren't confined to the sidewalks: Getting in and out of 15 sorority houses also proved to be a challenge for Scarlett. As her Pi Chi, Welter said she helped Scarlett get to and from each house in time and worked to "make her feel like every other woman." But the inaccessibility of some houses meant Scarlett was often forced to use different entrances from the other women.

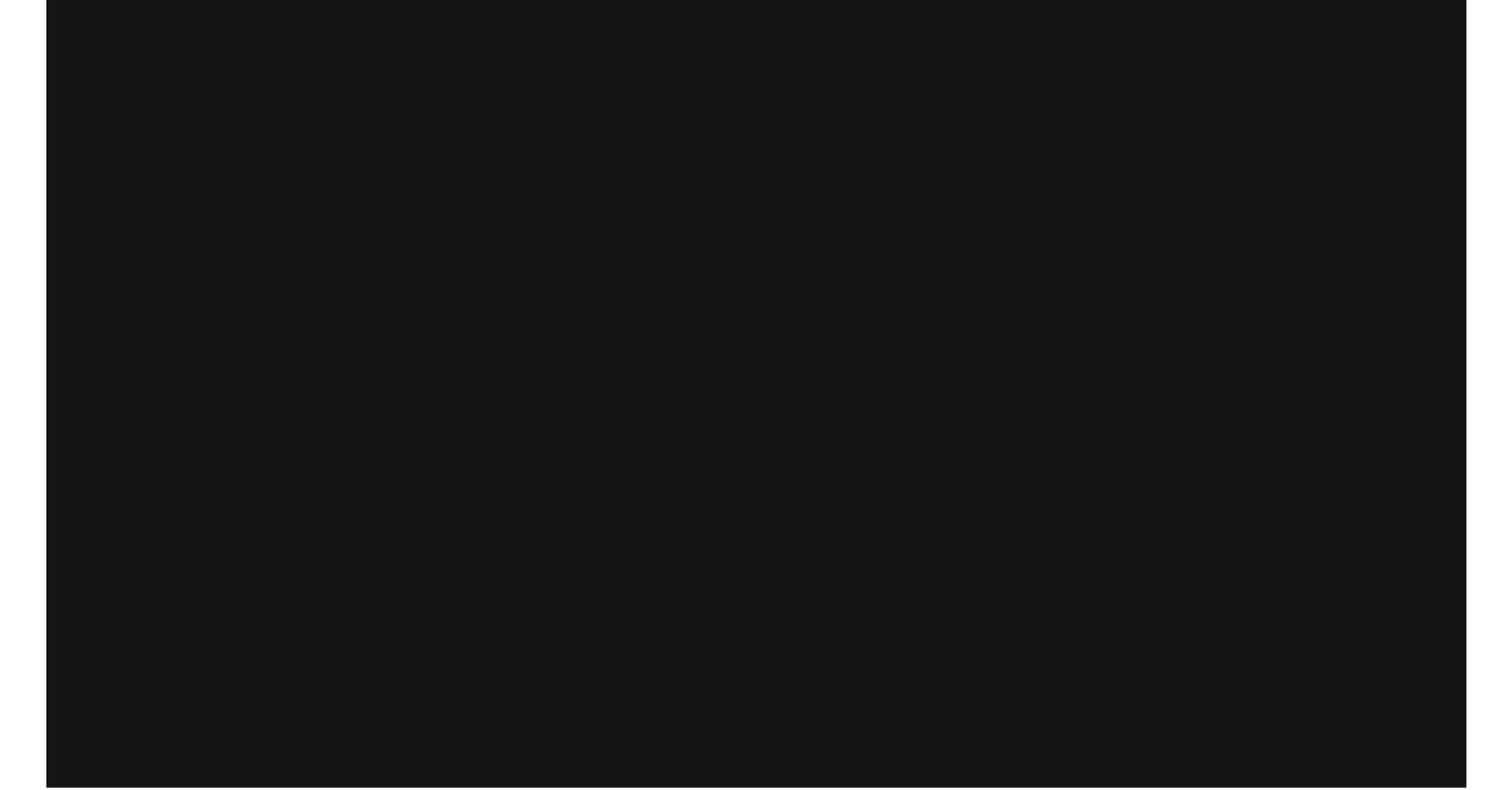
"Everyone wants to get in through the front door," Scarlett said. "Who wants to get in from around the back? I want to be normal."

While most houses had either a ramp leading up to the front door or an accessible side or back entrance, two houses had to rent a temporary aluminum ramp from Columbia's Services for Independent Living. Scarlett said the ramps weren't efficient and still made it challenging for her to get into the houses.

"It just made me realize that not everywhere will be accessible for me," she said. "And it just kind of hit me like, 'Scarlett, you're not going to be able to do everything in life you're going to want to do because everything is not going to be the way you need it.'"

Looking back, Scarlett said, her fall on the sidewalk was the first of many instances that pushed her to drop out of recruitment. After two days, it was obvious that Greektown was inaccessible for her.

Not wanting to offend, Scarlett said she never told anyone in Greek Life the truth about her "stressful, eye-opening and frustrating" experience. Instead, she told Welter that she dropped out because she wanted to dedicate all her time to schoolwork.



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**S**carlett never expected the accessibility of Greektown to be as poor as it is because she assumed it would be as accessible as MU's campus. But the rules are different on the other side of Tiger Avenue: Sorority and fraternity houses are not university property. Although the Americans with Disabilities Act was signed in 1990 to prohibit “discrimination against people with disabilities in employment, transportation, public accommodation, communications, and governmental activities,” privately owned and independently developed Greektown is exempted, as fraternity and sorority houses are considered private clubs under Title III of the ADA.

For MU's ADA compliance manager Amber Cheek, the private club exemption brews frustration. While she works to maintain and improve the accessibility on campus, fraternities and sororities are legally outside her sphere of influence. Cheek, who graduated from MU's School of Law, said MU would be responsible for funding or making Greektown more accommodating only if the university bought all of its properties — a solution she doesn't foresee happening. Instead, she makes herself available to fraternity and sorority members as a resource for ADA education.

“Just because (sororities and fraternities) fall under an exception in the ADA doesn't mean

they shouldn't plan to make things accessible," Cheek said. "I think that with awareness, they might decide to plan (for) accessibility."

## ARE GREEK CHAPTERS PRIVATE CLUBS?

UNDER THE AMERICANS WITH DISABILITIES ACT, GREEK CHAPTERS ARE EXEMPT AS PRIVATE CLUBS.

- MEMBERS EXERCISE A HIGH DEGREE OF CONTROL OVER CLUB OPERATIONS
- THE MEMBERSHIP SELECTION PROCESS IS HIGHLY SELECTIVE
- SUBSTANTIAL MEMBERSHIP FEES ARE CHARGED
- THE ENTITY IS OPERATED ON A NONPROFIT BASIS
- THE CLUB WAS NOT FOUNDED SPECIFICALLY TO AVOID COMPLIANCE WITH FEDERAL CIVIL RIGHTS LAWS

*BEN KOTHE // GRAPHICS MANAGER*

In fact, as PHA's Vice President of Public Relations, Welter said the first step houses should take toward becoming more accessible is listening to the experiences of people with disabilities. Welter said she recognizes how hard it is for someone who doesn't experience the struggles of a disability on a daily basis to truly understand what someone with a disability goes through.

The Missouri Students Association's Campus and Community Relations Committee has also taken note of the lack of accessibility in Greektown. Senior Chad Phillips, who resigned as CCRC chair in early February and is now a candidate for City Council, said in late January that the first step to finding a solution to the inaccessibility of Greektown is spreading awareness.

"We just want to make sure that they're not unknowingly pushing people away," Phillips said. "We need to say, 'Hey, there's people that want to be in your house, but they can't because you don't have a ramp.' ... This is obviously something that's a problem. There's no denying it and there's no argument against it. It's just one of those things that should have happened a long time ago."

However, CCRC is facing a few obstacles. The current CCRC chairman, Syed Ejaz, said relations between MSA and Greek Life have always been poor because of a lack of project follow-through. The City of Columbia is also a player.

"We've looked a lot into pushing the city very hard as far as repairing those sidewalks," Phillips said. "They're miserable."

Unlike some college campuses, MU does not own all **the streets and sidewalks in Greektown**. Therefore, the university is not liable for any faults in the concrete, or for incidents like Scarlett's. Adam Kruse, the City of Columbia's assistant city counselor and

ADA coordinator, said he has not personally heard of any complaints regarding the sidewalks or streets of Greektown.

“If the city knows about a dangerous condition on a sidewalk, then responsibilities kick in and we need to fix the dangerous condition,” Kruse said. [Issues can be reported to the city using an online form.](#)



When students with disabilities do decide to participate in recruitment, some sororities and fraternities have to compensate for their houses' poor accessibility by renting aluminum ramps. This short-term solution is confusing for inclusivity advocates like Cheek because students with disabilities who successfully participate need permanent access to their houses.

Kathleen Duffy, Greek Life's recruitment specialist, said in an email that Greek Life does not collect information about participants' disabilities. Welter said that to her knowledge, Scarlett is the only woman to go through formal recruitment in a wheelchair in the past few years. Scarlett's situation is one “a lot of people don't encounter,” Welter said.

As to why more students with disabilities don't participate in recruitment, Welter said: “I

think a lot of the fears (people with disabilities have) are that they wouldn't be accepted or that they wouldn't be able to get in the chapter houses.”

Scarlett said she was undeterred by the assumption that people with disabilities — people like her — don't go through recruitment.

“Just because someone has a disability doesn't mean they're not going to do it,” she said. “There are some people that are determined. For someone to say people with disabilities don't do this or people with disabilities don't do that, we can do whatever the hell we want to do. It's just that the reason we don't do it is because you have shitty houses that we can't get through. It's not that we're incapable of doing it, it's that you're incapable of letting us do it.”

Greek leaders have worked to make recruitment more accessible in some regards. In 2012 and 2013, Angela Branson, who is the coordinator of deaf services at the MU Disability Service Office, was a sign language interpreter for students during recruitment.



AN OBSTRUCTED SECTION OF SIDEWALK ON ROLLINS STREET ON TUESDAY, MARCH 31, 2015, IN COLUMBIA, MO. THIS SECTION IS SIMILAR TO MANY SIDEWALKS IN GREEKTOWN, WHICH ARE DIFFICULT TO MANEUVER FOR PEOPLE IN

“Everybody I talked to in Greek Life or the upper administration of the chapters have been great,” Branson said. “They’re accommodating and they want to do the best for the (students) that are going through this process, (which is) stressful enough as it is.”

In her two years interpreting during recruitment, Branson said she’s seen students have both positive and negative experiences with Greek life. One of Branson’s students left her chapter after two years because she felt mistreated by other members, while another felt welcomed by her chapter.

“Currently, I have a student who is in a chapter, she lives in a house, and she’s doing fabulous,” Branson said. “She’s a great leader. She’s on all these boards and she’s flourishing. But, she’s the exception to the rule I would say.”

Unfortunately, Scarlett didn’t feel like people truly believed she could successfully participate in recruitment. They just figured she could try.

“They help people with disabilities for (philanthropy), so why wouldn’t they not want them in their sorority?” she said. “Sometimes I feel like they’d do it charity-wise. Not because they want you there but because they want to be like, ‘Look at us, we have someone with a disability.’”

While Scarlett attempted recruitment, both Cheek and Branson have noticed that most students simply self-select out of the recruitment process all together.

“I think a lot of times students go to Greek organizations because they’re looking for a place to belong, especially on a campus with 30,000 plus people,” Branson said. “You’re looking for your niche and comfort zone. I think we’ve had a lot of students try to find that niche with the Greek community and then they just think, ‘Why fight another battle?’”

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**B**ut making a house ADA-compliant isn’t simple. Chapters must raise funds for renovations, and they are required to have the renovation approved by their individual house corporation board. Normally, the board is a corporate entity responsible for the

upkeep, maintenance and financial health of the physical property of their house; it controls the budget, strategic plan, replacements and all initiatives concerning the physical structure and the land.

Abigail O'Sullivan currently serves on the House Corporation Board of Chi Omega — a sorority whose house was recently rebuilt and is now 100 percent ADA-compliant. While she said the benefits of the new, accessible house have been “extraordinarily wonderful,” she understands why other houses aren't so eager to renovate.

“A lot of the Greektown houses are very historic and older — ours was, too,” O'Sullivan said. “We did have some alumni that were very upset because we were taking down a very historic, beautiful, old home. And I can understand that, I really can. But when you start comparing safety, accessibility, cost of an old home . . . we decided that it was time to instead of going historic, look at what we can do to actually meet the chapter's needs.”

O'Sullivan also encourages anyone who is renovating to incorporate accessibility into their future plans. “Don't make it special,” she said. “Make it standard.”

Not all Greek houses are stuck in their original blueprint. Many Greek houses have already made major renovations or rebuilt to become more accessible despite their private club exemption under the ADA. For instance, Delta Upsilon's new house currently under construction at the corner of Tiger Avenue and Rollins Street will be 100 percent ADA-compliant. Steve Layne, president of LayneCo Construction and the project manager of the DU house, said the new house will have a ramp and an elevator, costing an estimated \$65,700 and \$80,000, respectively.

Cheek said it's only a matter of time until most Greek houses become more ADA-compliant.



ADA COMPLIANCE MANAGER AMBER CHEEK POSES FOR A PORTRAIT TUESDAY, MARCH 31, 2015, AT MCREYNOLDS HALL IN COLUMBIA, MO. ZACH BAKER/PHOTO EDITOR

“What a lot of people don’t know is the International Building Code, the code pretty much all architects use, now integrates a lot of the ADA standards,” Cheek said. “So it’s very likely that when these fraternities and sororities go in for a major renovation, the architect they hire will be using the IBC and will automatically include these things.”

Because the IBC is only implemented for major renovations rather than the small, cosmetic ones, there are still many opportunities for fraternities and sororities to improve their accessibility.

While Cheek advises that every chapter’s main architectural priority should be ensuring an accessible main entrance to their house, she recognizes the importance of baby steps.

“Greek architecture is all about this really impressive entrance with columns and steps going up to it,” she said. “I think in order to ensure that \_\_at least\_\_ rush is accessible, every fraternity and sorority should look into buying that aluminum ramp if they have those

steps.”

Cheek said accessibility features make life easier for everyone.

“They help dudes who go off on adventures on spring break and come back on crutches, and they help people unloading and bringing in furniture for moving in,” she said. “Every building should have a ramp just for practicality — even if you don’t fall under the ADA.”

**W**hile an accessible entrance is a great feature for every Greek house to have, it isn’t a comprehensive solution. Even if a person in a wheelchair is able to get through the front door, he or she may not be able to fully participate in all of the Greek events.

“It’s not easy,” Cheek said. “To be truly inclusive, it takes more than just the physical side of it. You don’t want people with disabilities joining a fraternity or sorority because they can now get in the door and then not having an equal experience. That’s why it’s important that if fraternities and sororities want to make the move to become more inclusive, they have to think about it holistically.”

As an amputee herself, Cheek brings a unique perspective to the accessibility argument and said living a life with a disability is inherently valuable. While Cheek said she would never think any fraternity or sorority would want to exclude a person with a disability, there has to be a broader, more inclusive understanding in order for the Greek culture to change. If houses within Greektown collectively make the accommodations more accessible, she said, the equal opportunity of recruitment would bring a new kind of diversity to Greek Life — adding an extra layer of richness to the community.

“Disability is just another form of diversity,” Cheek said. “People with disabilities are really creative with problem solving and bring enormous insights (as well as) an interesting way to look at the world.”

Scarlett said she felt pushed away by the Greek community. She felt discriminated against because of her disability — she was sent to side entrances, couldn’t safely navigate the sidewalks and generally did not feel she was treated fairly — and she regrets participating in formal recruitment at all.

“I was depressed for the first couple months of college,” Scarlett said. “I was just like, ‘Do I even need to be here?’ Is this for me? Because if it’s not going to be built for me, then do I really need to be here that bad?”

This experience was before classes even started, and it colored Scarlett’s experience at MU — she is almost sure she is going to leave MU and transfer to Arkansas State University. She went into recruitment hoping to find friends. Instead, she’s never heard from the students she met during recruitment. She wanted to find her place on campus. Instead, she felt ostracized. When asked if she was able to take anything away from her experience, Scarlett’s reply was immediate.

“I got a couple of T-shirts,” she said.