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# A help dog for Daniele

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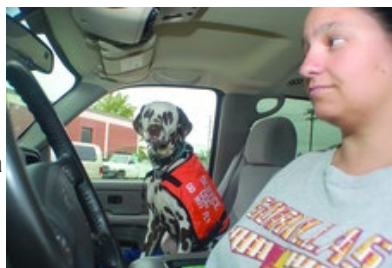
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Imagine dropping to the ground, jerking and seizing in the middle of a movie, during a final or at a wedding. Daniele Cunningham, senior in English, has seizures up to four times a day. Only three hours before this interview, she had a seizure.

"It's incredibly embarrassing," Cunningham said. "There you are doing this really weird thing and everybody's staring, and most people are really sympathetic, but they're just staring like, 'What's wrong with that girl? What's wrong with her?'"

While most epileptics have attributed their seizures to head injuries, tumors or genetics, Cunningham and her doctors have found no reason for her episodes. While in a defense language institute class in the Navy, she had her first seizure. "One day I wasn't epileptic, and five minutes later I was and have been ever since," Cunningham said. She has intractable epilepsy, which is not responsive to medication. She said that she has been on medication for 10 years, just trying to find the right combination. Since being medically discharged from the Navy, Cunningham said that paying for her



Media Credit: Aaron Anders  
Although Daniele Cunningham can't drive now, she was able to do so a month ago when this photo was taken. Currently, her husband drives her to classes

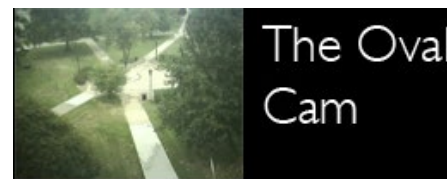
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medications is not an issue.

"I am really lucky that way, but for other people I know it's a huge problem," Cunningham said after explaining that only one of her medications costs \$690 a month.

Side effects like losing hair, anorexia, depression and weight gain are common from the types of medication she has to take.

Cunningham said that she has two types of seizures, grand mal and petite mal.

"The grand mal seizures don't really feel like anything because I'm unconscious, and afterwards it feels I'm hung over," Cunningham said. "I have a headache and I'm very tired and it's hard to think. It's like thinking through molasses. It takes time to get over it."

She said her seizures last for a minute, but the unconscious feeling lasts up to 20 minutes each time. She is not allowed to drive or ride a bike, and has to be careful around weights and going off alone.

"It doesn't get scary until I figure out who I am and where I am and then it gets really scary, because then I realize just what happened and how vulnerable I was," Cunningham said.

Cunningham travels with a seizure response dog, Jinx. He is a two and a half year old Dalmatian.

"There's a lot of times that I have been able to come to class that I wouldn't have without him," Cunningham said. "He helps me go down hallways, he helps me go down stairs, up stairs, he helps me with curbs, and another thing he does for me is when I do have grand mal seizures, he lays down by my head and he keeps me from banging it around a lot."

Service dogs are normally expensive, but a friend of Cunningham trains dogs to help guide blind people, and has let Cunningham get to know Jinx since



Media Credit: Aaron Anders  
Daniele Cunningham gets help climbing up the stairs to class in Russ Hall by her dog Jinx. Before Jinx, Cunningham would have to miss class frequently because of her epilepsy.



Media Credit: Aaron Anders  
Jinx stands ready to help senior Daniele Cunningham, who has epilepsy, go to class. Dalmatians are rarely trained as help dogs because of their personality traits. However, Jinx is an exception.

August. If they continue to click, Cunningham will keep Jinx.

"Most people think that I'm training him," Cunningham said. "I don't have a handicap that people can visibly see, so they don't know what to think of it." Aside from social hindrances, Cunningham's epilepsy affects her schooling and career. After the Navy, she attended K-State with a major in computer science, but had to change because the computer programs triggered her seizures. She then transferred to Pitt State to be closer to family. In transferring, she was close to a sociology degree, which Cunningham earned in May, but because of all the anxiety about taking the Graduate Record Exam to get into graduate school, her seizures prohibited her from continuing on that path.

She is now earning an English degree in hopes of teaching at the collegiate level.

"It's frustrating, and it's kind of painful, and here I am getting this advanced education, and I don't even know if I can teach with it," Cunningham said. "So I am limited by (having seizures), and it's frustrating."

Cunningham's husband, who deals with her condition on a daily basis, is still cautious about her seizures.

"There's times when he's afraid to let me out of his sight," Cunningham said.

"There's times when he sits on campus in the truck because he's afraid I'll have a seizure. So it makes it hard for him to have a life because he's afraid I'll have a seizure and he won't be there."

Cunningham said that her seizures scared her son when he was younger.

"It was really scary for him because he didn't know what was wrong with mama," Cunningham said.

Pitt State offers helpful services for people with disabilities. The Equal Opportunity Office communicates with students with disabilities and professors about the student and their accommodation needs.

Cunningham does have some advice for handling a seizure.

"If I have a seizure, there's not a lot that people can do, but the first thing they should do is not panic," Cunningham said. "It's a really scary-looking thing. It looks a lot worse than it is. Don't stick things in my mouth. There's a myth that people can swallow your tongue, but you can't do it. I may bite my tongue, I've done it before and got it bleeding. Time the seizure. If it goes over five minutes of actual jerking, then I've entered what's called status epilepticus ... then an ambulance needs to be called because that requires medical intervention to get that stopped. And after that, it's just letting the seizure run its course."

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