

NEWS

OPINION

OBITUARIES ([HTTPS://THETABLET.ORG/CATEGORY/OBITUARIES/](https://thetablet.org/category/obituaries/))

SPORTS

EVENTS (/CATHOLICGATHERINGS/)

NEWSLETTER ([HTTPS://THETABLET.ORG/EMAILSIGNUP/](https://thetablet.org/emailsSignup/))

SUPPORT US

DIOCESAN NEWS ([HTTPS://THETABLET.ORG/CATEGORY/DIOCESAN-NEWS/](https://thetablet.org/category/diocesan-news/))

Student With Cerebral Palsy Flourishes at ADA-Friendly St. Francis College

December 10, 2023

By Alicia Venter (<https://thetablet.org/author/aliciaventer/>)

Listen to this article

0:00 / 3:58 1X



*Jessica Huang uses her walker in the hallways of St. Francis College. The width of the hallways and concrete floors allow her the space and ability to use the walker.
(Photo: Alicia Venter)*

DOWNTOWN BROOKLYN — Jessica Huang, born with cerebral palsy, looks at life a little differently than most of her fellow classmates at St. Francis College. The 20-year-old navigates the world in her wheelchair and has put herself at the forefront of disability advocacy at the school.

Through meetings with Tim Cecere, the interim president of St. Francis, and her professors, Huang has worked to implement changes in policy and perspective designed to make the urban campus a better place.

"Almost everyone has my back," Huang said. "As hard as it is to be the only one sometimes, I really appreciate it here because there is always someone I can talk to."

Fortunately for Huang, a junior, St. Francis had already begun concerted efforts to make life more convenient and comfortable for disabled members of the student body, even before she started school there.

St. Francis moved its longtime Brooklyn Heights campus to nearby Downtown Brooklyn over a year ago. The old campus had all the basics: elevators, single-use bathrooms, and Braille-equipped signage. However, the elevators were too small, and she sometimes had to wait upwards of 15 minutes for a single elevator ride.

In its new, 100% ADA-compliant campus (<https://thetablet.org/college-exceeds-compliance-standards-for-students-with-disabilities-aims-to-welcome/>), all within one easy-to-navigate building, St. Francis has more than 850,000 square feet across three floors that have been crafted to be accessible for all.



Jessica Huang is a junior at St. Francis College. Born with cerebral palsy, she has found a safe home at St. Francis. (Photo: Alicia Venter)

The elevator is equipped with speakers for the visually impaired and is wide enough to fit Huang, her aide, and a handful of other students. The hallways are wide enough for Huang's wheelchair and her walker, which she uses occasionally.

"It's kind of our mission with the college — welcoming all and embracing all," said Cecere who, in his previous career in advertising, had written an article for the online marketing and media industry venue The Drum (<https://www.thedrum.com/opinion/2017/09/25/how-advertising-can-tackle-its-disability-deficit>) about what needs to be done to accommodate individuals with disabilities.

People with disabilities are the largest minority group in the country, comprising over 50 million people nationwide, according to the U.S. Office of Disability Employment Policy (<https://www.dol.gov/agencies/odep/publications/fact-sheets/diverse-perspectives-people-with-disabilities-fulfilling-your-business-goals>) — and anyone is one accident away from joining it, Huang noted, adding, "When you think of people with disabilities, you have to think of who might be next, because that next person could be you."

Huang, a psychology major, said that when she first arrived on campus, she sensed that fire safety plans in the school building as they affected the disabled were lacking. After sharing that concern with Cecere and other college officials, she is now confident someone will be available to meet with her in cases of emergencies.

Advocacy for the disabled has become a priority for the Catholic Church, and for December, Pope Francis' prayer intention is for people with disabilities, so they may be the focus of the faithful during December. Often marginalized, the disabled must be met with "big hearts" by Christians, the pope said in the video (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B8EpBQ_6Ndw) released Tuesday, Nov. 28.



Jessica Huang has a 4.0 GPA and is looking to go to graduate school to become a social worker. Below: Huang with her parents and her two older brothers.

Though she herself is not Catholic, Huang feels that the Franciscan values of compassion and kindness are present in the atmosphere of the school and have enhanced her college experience, and that the Holy Father is a unifying force.

"I don't just believe [the pope] has the power to unite Catholics and Christians. He has the power to unite everyone, and the fact that he's uniting people over the struggles I face and so many other people face is a great thing," Huang said.

Hearing Huang's concerns about faculty not being educated enough about the disabled community, Cecere is starting a campaign on how to "welcome, embrace, and accommodate" those with disabilities.

"Do not make any assumptions about anything. Do not do their thinking for them," Cecere said. "They will tell you. When you have that information, you are compelled to act and compelled to change."

Tags: [ADA](https://thetablet.org/tag/ada/), [ADA Friendly](https://thetablet.org/tag/ada-friendly/), [ADA-compliant campus](https://thetablet.org/tag/ada-compliant-campus/), [Jessica Huang](https://thetablet.org/tag/jessica-huang/), [Pope Francis](https://thetablet.org/tag/pope-francis/), [St. Francis College](https://thetablet.org/tag/st-francis-college/), [Tim Cecere](https://thetablet.org/tag/tim-cecere/)