It is a pleasure to be addressing the University of Illinois Board of Trustees this morning. This fall, the University of Illinois became a more inclusive environment with the opening of Nugent Hall. For decades Illinois has broken new ground in providing students of all abilities (and disabilities) with the tools necessary to reach their life dreams, as Dr. Nugent and other visionaries believed was possible. As a three year resident I consider myself lucky to have experienced the university.

Coming from a small town in rural Indiana (population about 6,000) I was not very worldly, with lots of ambition and no direction. A friend told me about the many opportunities and supports that Illinois had for students with severe physical disabilities. After researching my options of where to attend college, I chose the University of Illinois for a variety of reasons. First, I wanted a challenging academic environment that would prepare me for my future career aspirations. Second, I was looking for an opportunity to get outside of my comfort zone, go someplace where I knew no one and no one knew me – it was a new beginning. A Big Ten university, specifically the University of Illinois was a great match. Finally, Beckwith Hall with its established support programs and staff was a deciding factor.

During my first few weeks on campus, the U of I program felt altogether alien to me. A deep inner drive to explore and learn that high school had gradually deprived me of was suddenly reawakened by a student body with higher standards. It was an adjustment to say the least. My classmates worked hard and, in turn, I was motivated to do the same or better. What motivated me even more, though, were my friends.

As a freshman, I immediately found a close circle of friends with my fellow Beckwith residents and personal assistants. In less than a semester on campus I was part of a close knit group of people with whom I could share anything. What I had at Beckwith in less than a semester, took me years to create in high school. Although the building itself was located far from the other dorms, we lived a pretty typical dorm life, consisting largely of late night Domino’s, weekends playing videogames in the lounge, and occasionally homework. It wasn’t all fun and games though. One evening while returning from my calculus class, I was pulled over by a police officer on John Street. He ticketed me with going the wrong way in a one way, something I didn’t see much of way out in the countryside. A silly mistake on my part, but an interesting anecdote nonetheless.

Looking back over the last two years, an important aspect of my time on campus has revolved around the people I have met, each has taught me much and added depth to my character. These people and relationships would not be an integral part of my life if it wasn’t for the University of Illinois and Beckwith.

In spite of the lawlessness, late nights and lazy Sundays, I think it’s been a pretty good experience for me so far. Thank you.