

# Celebrating Success for Adults with Autism Spectrum Disorders

nine stories of successful transition to  
adult life

Compiled by the Centers for Autism and Related Disabilities  
*Florida's First Choice for Autism Supports*

June 2008

## Daniel's Story

When you ask Daniel's mother, Ann, what she feels is Daniel's biggest accomplishment thus far in life, she does not take long to respond. "Independence!" Independence is a naturally follows high school for many young adults, but for Daniel, independence is an impressive achievement following many years of obstacles and difficulties that he has overcome with support from family and a close mentor.

Daniel was lucky to have Ann, who took these hurdles along-side him as well. Told by a doctor when Daniel was four that "he's untestable, hopelessly mentally retarded" and to "start shopping for institutions, because you'll need one by the time he's nine years old," Ann did not give up on her child. She and Daniel began a long journey together that has resulted in Daniel's independence.

The transition from adolescence to adulthood is never an easy one, and for Daniel it was significantly more challenging. His family knew that change was at times a hard thing for Daniel to adapt to and began planning for his adult transition early. When Daniel began middle school, Ann called a meeting of all of the teachers. A close relationship with Daniel's teachers was a key ingredient to his success over the years. In fact, it was in middle school that Daniel met the teacher that has had the most impact in his life: Mr. Jewel. Daniel describes him as "a young guy who helped me and seemed like a nice guy," whereas his mother would describe Mr. Jewel as retired marine colonel, who made her wonder, upon first meeting him, how he could ever know anything about children with disabilities. Though their initial perceptions of Mr. Jewel were different, they agree that the impact he made on Daniel's life is incomparable. Mr. Jewel gave Daniel the confidence and challenges he needed in order to succeed, and that in turn

began setting the steps towards achieving independence. Mr. Jewel became a mentor to Daniel, and still influences his life today.

The transition to adulthood was a process of many years for Daniel, and is still ongoing in some ways. The first major sign that Daniel was ready for and wanting independence came soon after Daniel entered his twenties. His older siblings had recently moved out and gotten married or gone to college. Daniel asked his mother if he could do the same, but there were always reasons to delay it: they had talked about building a house for him...she wasn't sure she was ready...she didn't know how he would do. The longer they waited, the more erratic Daniel's behaviors became. He became frustrated, and began taking the behaviors out on those he cared about. As Daniel and Ann were out driving one day, there was a sign on the side of the road advertising a house for rent. Daniel was adamant about seeing it, and Ann decided to just drive by. The woman who owned the place was there cleaning the house, and as Ann and Daniel walked around, he kept telling the woman he was going to live there. Before she knew it, Ann was signing a lease, and Daniel had his own place.

Daniel began to live independently in October 2003, at the age of twenty-two when he moved out of his mother's house, though he had been working for several years to get to that point. He has been living in his house now for about five years, and he wants to live there for the rest of his life. When Daniel first moved in, he received round-the-clock supervision, with funding support from the Agency for Persons with Disabilities. Even so, his mother still drove by several times at night, afraid he might be wandering the neighborhoods. Since then assistance has been reduced to two basic people: one is a male teacher who comes by after school some afternoons and goes with Daniel if he needs a haircut or needs to do

grocery shopping, and the other is his supported living coach who comes in about 20 hours a month, and coordinates things that need to be done, such as doctor's appointments. Daniel also works for Wal-Mart, where he has been a cart-pusher for almost a year now.

Several strategies Ann used during the transition were helpful in achieving Daniel's success. For Daniel, money was an incentive. When he worked his first job in high school as litter crew on the roads, he wanted to go to work because he knew he would be making minimum wage, and Daniel loves money. He quickly learned the value of a dollar, and knew that work equaled money. The same concept applied when signing the lease on the house. One way to get through to Daniel the meaning of living there and taking care of everything was having the landlord spell out exactly what it meant if he damaged something or didn't take care of something in the apartment. After Daniel realized he would be responsible for the damage and would have to pay for it, he understood what it meant to him.

Daniel's successful transition to adulthood is about more than just finding a place of his own and working. Independence for Daniel also includes getting married. Daniel met his fiancée, Shannon, while working on litter crew, and they have been dating for the past five years. In Daniel's words, "he wants to keep her for the rest of his life, and try to keep her out of trouble, and she'll do the same for him." Their marriage will be one more piece of independence Daniel has worked so hard to achieve.

As far as the future goes, Daniel has clear goals. He hopes one day to save up his money and buy a Mustang. He wants to marry Shannon and for her to move into his house, and he wants to make the marriage work. His mother is a little

wary about the driving part, but concedes that it might happen one day. He will continue receiving support, but will probably not be as intensive. When asked to look back over the past twenty-seven years, and the expectations she had, Ann believes that her expectations have been exceeded, but they have been replaced by new expectations. Perhaps that is why Daniel has been so successful. Daniel has exceeded many of the predictions that professionals set for Ann, but not without a lot of work and support from his family. The advice she has for others approaching the transition to adulthood is simple: keep a good sense of humor because it doesn't matter what the issue is today, it's going to be something else tomorrow.

Daniel is a remarkable person, complete with stories, ideas, and his own "philosophies" about life. He is open about having autism and Tourette's Syndrome, and how these have affected his transition to adulthood, and his life today. Daniel is a success, if for no other reason than the fact that he has found a key to being happy, and that is keeping things simple. When asked about his current life, Daniel says, "I feel happy, and I feel desired," and really, what more could anyone ask for?

## Alonzo's Story

Alonzo, now 31, is diagnosed with Asperger Syndrome (AS). He says he demands perfection in what he does and is passionate about his work. This work ethic has helped Alonzo to overcome many challenges. Alonzo grew up outside the US, and he didn't receive any type of accommodations or extra assistance in order to make it through high school. Alonzo's grades were above average, but the social aspect of high school was "miserable." His favorite classes included math, science, and home economics.

Alonzo didn't receive any specific transition planning; however, Alonzo knew he wanted to go to college when he graduated. He found a college close to home, and started taking classes in computers, business management, economics, and many others. He went to school full-time and occasionally made the Dean's List. As part of his graduation requirements, Alonzo had to do a practicum with a local business. He got a job in a hardware store owned by a family friend. "My favorite part was organizing the bills correctly and placing them into each billing envelope and counting each hardware item." He inventoried supplies, processed vouchers and receipts, and helped with billing. Alonzo graduated at the top of his class with a Bachelors degree in Entrepreneurship. After college Alonzo's family helped him find work in the campus cafeteria as a cashier and helping with inventory in the kitchen. Later his family moved to Florida. However, Alonzo's immigration status does not currently allow him to work. Furthermore, he is not eligible for any public benefits like Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) or Supplemental Security Income (SSI). Alonzo's family has retained an attorney to work on his immigration status.

Alonzo's dream is to have a job. Ideally, he'd like to work with computers, electronics, software, or even manage a restaurant. He isn't afraid of hard work and says he is willing to start as a janitor and work his way up. His mother helped him find a position volunteering at a local office for 2 years. Alonzo assembles and organizes brochures and other documents into information packets. He helps with filing, other clerical tasks, and volunteers to help with special events. Using the computer is one of his favorite activities so he enjoys assisting with data entry. He helps wherever help is needed. It means a lot to him to be able to use his skills to help others. "I like the camaraderie and chemistry I have with everyone here," he says. People in the office feel the same way. Teresa, a fellow employee says Alonzo is "pleasant to work with; sweet and friendly. He loves giving advice is concerned about other people's troubles and situations." Alonzo says volunteering has taught him to "balance being aggressive and being softy." Alonzo says, "I am most proud of feeling like part of a family at the office."

Alonzo loves to keep busy. When he's not volunteering he loves to watch all types of sporting events on TV including: football, horse racing, gymnastics, and soccer. He also loves cooking, shopping, going to the movies, eating out, reading instruction manuals, or just spending time with his brothers. He attends a CARD support group and loves getting to interact with others. Alonzo is also a fan of *American Idol* and calls it "the best show of the decade." He says that before he started watching the show, he struggled with being disrespectful to his father. Alonzo believes the TV show helped him bond with his family and see what typical American families are like. It helped him realize that "in America kids go out in the world at 18 and fend for themselves. It made me want to be more independent."

Alonzo lives with his family and is grateful for their support, “My family has been really important in helping me be successful.” At home he does the laundry, dishes, cooks, and helps with other chores. He doesn’t drive or use special transportation. Instead, his family drives him to and from the office. Alonzo wishes he had a car and could drive himself to go shopping or visit local attractions. He wouldn’t change a thing if he could. In fact Alonzo says his motto is, “Be yourself and be grateful for the things that might come to you in life.”

## Sal’s Story

Sal is a 21 year old man with Asperger Syndrome. He attended a boarding school in another state, and transition services were not provided through his school. Following graduation, Sal attended a regional college. Within the first year, however, he decided that college was not for him (at least temporarily). He moved back to South Florida and began working with a private agency that provides adult services. Sal credits his success to the Jewish Association for Residential Care (JARC), the agency that provides him with adult services, his supported living coach, employment specialists, and CARD. His services are paid for by his family, and he does not receive Supplemental Security income (SSI).

Sal has lived in a supported living apartment with a roommate for the last two years. The two have become very good friends. They prepare meals together several times a week and go out for diner and recreation at least once a week. Sal has made several friends in addition to his roommate and his access to community recreation has improved over the last several years. While Sal previously described himself as lonely, and without friends, he is now in a drama club and is



preparing for a play. He also attends an adult social group facilitated by CARD. He credits this group for the opportunities he has had to make friends. Some members meet to socialize outside of the group and Sal takes advantage of these opportunities when he can.

Sal is quite independent but does require minimal prompting for daily obligations such as, remaining organized, keeping a schedule, and maintaining appointments. His supported living coach has provided these services since he moved into his apartment and both have noted that Sal has made tremendous progress with daily living routines, employment, and community integration. He has a license to operate a scooter and Moped. His roommate, however, has a license to drive a car and frequently helps Sal get around the community. Sal also uses public transportation frequently.

Sal also receives supported employment services. He is a kennel technician at a local veterinarian practice, where his responsibilities include feeding, watering, and walking dogs that stay for boarding. He also cleans their crates. Sal's biggest challenge is getting to work on time. He is not a morning person and prefers to sleep in. An employment specialist, his job coach, and work supervisors have worked with Sal on this issue, and improvements have been noted.

Sal also owns and operates a small dog walking business when he is away from the animal hospital. He has a steady clientele and is working to expand his business. Some of his other interests include writing short stories, listening to music, watching television, and surfing the Internet. Recently, Sal became interested in public speaking. He likes to share his story with others, as well as discussing other topics. He has presented at local conferences, and is currently being scheduled to speak to First Responders about Asperger

## Syndrome.

Sal feels that his transition to adult life could have been a little smoother. Although he was considered to be college bound, but his school did not provide supports once he graduated. In light of this, Sal has several recommendations for professionals who help students transition from school to adult life:

- Have more faith in others' abilities
- Consider students' achievements when planning goals, objectives, and when teaching
- Allow students more choice in regard to preparing for their futures
- Provide assistance on an individuals basis, rather than a "one size fits all" approach
- Be patient.

Sal has many plans for his immediate and long-term future. First, he wants to continue to meet people and make friends. He especially would like to develop a long-term relationship with someone. He eventually plans on moving out of his supported living apartment and would like to buy a home. He remains interested in having a roommate. He also wants to get a driver's license and own a car. He is very interested in continuing his animal care business and would like to expand it to include pet sitting. Finally, Sal is interested in pursuing college, but not quite yet.

## James' Story

James is a senior at Allen D. Nease High School enrolled in an International Baccalaureate (IB) program. Impressive—considering he was once thought to be a candidate only for Special Education. When James was diagnosed in fourth grade with Asperger Syndrome, Tourette's Syndrome and Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, his mother was a teacher for students with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) in a special education program. In spite of her background, she had a difficult time explaining her son's disabilities and capabilities, especially as they related to his dreams. She realized she had to start early to plan for his future, and she struggled through the years to make certain his educational needs were met.

In Middle School, James was enrolled in a magnet school and placed in the "Gifted Student" program. The teachers at his school were seriously concerned about his placement in this program. They read his IEP, protested his placement and called a formal meeting to address their issues and concerns. They said James' needs would be better served in special education. They argued he had considerable difficulties with speech and language, handwriting, and organizational skills. Other issues for the staff were their concerns about James' level of immaturity and accommodating his therapies and support classes at school such as Speech/Language Therapy, Occupational Therapy, and Learning Strategies.

During this time, his mother researched assistance, and she contacted her local CARD. Together with James and his Mother, CARD staff developed a "Plan for Success." This plan addressed his needs and desires, at home, school, and in the community. To optimize the plan's chances for success, CARD staff educated the school staff at James' Middle School on

“Best Practices” for students with varying levels of ASD, especially Asperger Syndrome.

Although some people felt James’ “needs” should have taken precedence in this plan, James’ plan began with his “desires” because this is what seemed to drive his passion and determination to succeed. James is able to discuss his disability and his ability to manage the behavioral effects of Asperger Syndrome most of the time. It was important to James that his “desires” also drive his IEP and future Transition IEPs to enable him to have a real chance to attain his dreams.

James has been an extremely successful student at Allen D. Nease. He achieved High Honor Roll, with a weighted grade point average of 4.7045, and ranks 10<sup>th</sup> in his class of 543. He is involved with National Honor Society and Science National Honor Society, and is Senior Student Government Vice President and President and founder of the Physics Club. In addition to his educational achievements, James has been active volunteer in his community. He is President and founder of ASPIRE (a volunteer group raising money for relief efforts), and works at Angelwood Camp as a mentor for students with developmental disabilities, including students with ASD.

James’ desire to work hard and succeed continues, and he is looking forward to attending college. He expects to graduate with an IB diploma and to pursue his dream as an Astrophysicist. He hopes to work along side renowned professionals in this field. His passion is to answer questions and solve problems in Quantum and Statistical Physics. James has recently interviewed at Cornell University in New York. The interview was performed by an engineer who conducted three space shuttle missions. So far he has been

offered a scholarship to Colgate University in New York worth \$42,024.00 (four years) and an additional scholarship to do research, worth \$5,000.00 (four years).

**Sample items from James's Plan for Success (Middle School)**

	Desires	Needs	Supports (People)
Home	Live at home Quiet place to study Basic needs supplied Acquire self management skills	Computer programs & internet access Career exploration Assistance filling out applications	Mom, Dad, sister Grandparents Aunts & Uncles UF CARD
School	Gifted Program – get good grades Enroll in International Baccalaureate Program Review IEP: PLOP statements, annual goals, and objectives Update IEP (as above) Related services School Supports/ Friends Inclusion in school activities Agency Assistance & Advocacy	CARD assistance School & teacher training Attend IEP meeting Accommodations (Daily/FCAT) Assistive Technology Therapies (SLP/OT) After school clubs Peer Buddies/Friend network/Mentor(s) Social Skills training	UF CARD Principal Gifted Teacher(s) Regular Education Teacher(s) Coach Guidance Counselor Parents
Community	Social, cultural, and sporting events Shopping Dining out Library access Movies Cell Phone	UF CARD assistance UF Hospital/Medication Management Social Skills Training Support Group Summer Camp Experiences	UF CARD UF Doctors Mental Health Professionals Support Grp Leaders Instructors/Supervisor

## Plan for Success (High School)

	Desires	Needs	Supports (People)	Agency Involvement
Home	<p>Live at home</p> <p>Acquire self management skills</p> <p>Transportation</p> <p>Career Exploration</p> <p>Explore work &amp; volunteer work experiences</p> <p>Connected to UF CARD</p> <p>Apply to colleges of choice</p> <p>Seek funding for college</p>	<p>Computer programs &amp; internet access</p> <p>Career Exploration</p> <p>Education re: Transition Services</p> <p>Apply to colleges</p> <p>Seek funding</p> <p>Cell Phone</p> <p>Apply for Scholarship Awards</p> <p>Assistance filling out applications &amp; other paperwork (e.g. Financial Aid, &amp; Government Benefits)</p>	<p>Mom, Dad, sister</p> <p>Grandparents</p> <p>Aunts &amp; Uncles</p> <p>Friends of family</p> <p>UF CARD</p>	<p>UF CARD</p> <p>Social Security</p> <p>Advocacy, Support, and Knowledge (ASK)</p> <p>Center for Independent Living</p> <p>UF Transition Center</p> <p>UF JaxHATS (Transition medical care service)</p> <p>*Any service, if needed</p>
School	<p>Get good grades</p> <p>Remain in International Baccalaureate Program - receive diploma</p> <p>Review IEP: PLOP statements, annual goals, and objectives</p> <p>Update IEP (as above)</p> <p>Related services (Consultative)</p> <p>School Supports</p> <p>Friends Network</p>	<p>UF CARD assistance</p> <p>-Educate teachers</p> <p>-Attend IEP meeting</p> <p>Accommodations (Daily/ FCAT/ IB Testing)</p> <p>-Assistive Technology</p> <p>Therapies (Speech/ Language, OT) assist in classroom</p>	<p>UF CARD</p> <p>IB Supervisor</p> <p>IB Teacher(s)</p> <p>Principal</p> <p>Regular Education Teacher</p> <p>Guidance Counselor</p>	<p>UF CARD</p> <p>IB Program Support Services</p> <p>Allen D. Nease High School</p> <p>Vocational Rehabilitation (if needed)</p> <p>Family Network on Disability</p>

	Desires	Needs	Supports (People)	Agency Involvement
School	<p>Friends Network</p> <p>Inclusion in school Activities</p> <p>Run for office in Student Government</p> <p>Tutor students in math/science</p> <p>Attend Prom</p>	<p>Learning Strategies</p> <p>After school clubs of interest &amp;/or develop club of interest</p> <p>SAT's, Advance Placement Testing, &amp; IB Testing</p> <p>Dress for Success workshop</p>	<p>Peer Buddies</p> <p>Friend network</p> <p>Teacher mentor (s)</p> <p>Parents</p>	<p>*Drive independently in the future</p>
Community	<p>Social, cultural, and sporting events</p> <p>Shopping</p> <p>Dining out</p> <p>Library access</p> <p>Movies</p> <p>Volunteer work</p> <p>Dating</p> <p>Vacation</p>	<p>Medication Management</p> <p>Treatment Programs</p> <p>Social Skills Training</p> <p>Support Groups</p> <p>Summer Camps</p> <p>Volunteer work &amp; work experiences</p> <p>Cell Phone</p> <p>Friend Network</p>	<p>UF CARD</p> <p>UF Doctors</p> <p>Regular Physician</p> <p>Mental Health Professionals</p> <p>Support Group Leaders</p> <p>Instructors/ Supervisor</p> <p>Parents</p>	<p>UF CARD</p> <p>UF Doctors</p> <p>Health care clinic</p> <p>Mental Health</p> <p>Center for Independent Living</p> <p>Disability Services at college</p> <p>JTA/ JIA (travel training)</p>

## Amanda's Story

Amanda is a friendly 20 year old woman with a zest for life. Amanda has been diagnosed with glaucoma, and autism, and has physical disabilities that impact her gait and resistance to fatigue.

Amanda's transition planning started in earnest in middle school when her family first saw barriers to life in the community emerge. Amanda hit puberty, and significant behavior challenges surfaced. She became aggressive, and the family saw that the options for Amanda's future were potentially changing as her disability combined with adolescence.

Amanda's family had to move a great deal due to her Father's job. Between 7<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> grade, the family moved several times. Amanda's aggressive behavior emerged during this time, and they sought help from psychiatric services for the first time. Amanda was evaluated by Dr. Kytcha Voeller, at Shand's Hospital in Gainesville. Although there were difficult periods, having a physician providing clinical oversight did lead to better treatment and intervention. Amanda's mother described the evaluations done at this time and subsequent therapeutic support as the first time a team of professionals truly helped and guided her. Amanda's evaluation included neurological testing as well as neurological exams and a full speech and language evaluation.

Amanda's mother recognized that Amanda was seeking independence, and was careful to create opportunities for independence to emerge. Amanda has two older brothers that have been extremely supportive and helpful throughout her childhood and adolescence. They provided support and oversight, as well as a social bridge to their own friends. Amanda's ability to initiate and sustain balanced relationships emerged as a result of their family system. In addition, typical expectations were established and



maintained to create independence in her taking care of herself and continuing to be a contributing member of the family.

For a time, after one of the family moves, Amanda lived with her maternal grandmother in Homosassa Springs, Fl. She began attending Lecanto High School. After four months in school, Amanda was the victim of several exploitation episodes, where she was goaded into behaving badly for the entertainment of others. This led her family to work with the Citrus County Schools to find an alternative placement. Amanda transferred to the Crest Center School. It was there that the family received excellent support and guidance from Mr. Paul Heinz, who remains a trusted team member who has been instrumental to Amanda's success. Mr. Heinz helped Amanda's family apply for and access the services of the Agency for Persons with Disabilities, and guided them through the Federal Disability applications and procedures.

Amanda was given her first set of work experiences through Citrus County's Transition Academy at Withlacoochee Technical Institute. Her first community based job experience was at Publix supermarket, bagging groceries. She succeeded in this setting, where she practiced how to engage in small talk, polished her empathy and perspective taking, and achieved high praise for her work. This experience set the stage for her success in her next on-the-job experience. Amanda then worked at a nursing home where she assisted with feeding residents, cleaning rooms, and playing games with the residents. Amanda misses doing this kind of work. She enjoyed the relationship building aspects of the work, and commented that it was very gratifying to bring joy to the people who lived there. Her last Transition Academy job was at a Best Western Hotel, where she was involved in housekeeping. This

lasted four months and unfortunately ended with a break down in the relationship with her job coach, who made a series of poor decisions that ended the working relationship between she and Amanda.

Upon returning to the Transition Academy, Amanda had matured in her views toward work, and had achieved good success on each of her work assignments. She expressed a strong interest in providing childcare services, but the staff was unwilling to work with her to achieve this outcome. This lack of person centered job development support led to Amanda leaving the Transition Academy to pursue a job on her own.

Amanda's dreams include having a place of her own. "I want to leave (home). I love my mom and dad, but I want to live on my own." Amanda now lives in a 32-foot travel trailer located on the property of her parents' home. She loves her privacy and the control over her surroundings. She is skilled in maintaining her household independently, and has excellent self care, community access, and independent work skills. She still needs transportation support due to the rural nature of her living situation.

Amanda enjoys photography, riding her bicycle, and using her computer extensively (email, chat, myspace). She has established friendships and contacts in the community, including developing a friendship with Storm Roberts, a local radio personality, and she plans outings and get-togethers—mostly with her family, and a few friends. She has adult friends in her neighborhood who provide some transportation help. Amanda also has near daily contact with her younger nephews and nieces, and maintains a wonderful relationship with her parents, and her brothers and their families. She enjoys cleaning house and often surprises her family by cleaning her mother's house while she is at work.

Amanda is still enrolled at the Crest School and works part time at Winn-Dixie, a job she got on her own, with her father's help. She continues to see a therapist at Shand's who helps her and her family with ongoing planning and medical supervision. She is on the waiting list for Agency for Persons with Disability supports and services, and receives social security disability support. Amanda has had romantic relationships in the past, and is interested in developing new relationships.

Amanda's long term vision is to live independently, possibly near Disney in Kissimmee, and to work at one of the theme parks. She may still pursue her child care interests and apply for training at the local community college certification programs in child care/child development. Amanda's mother noted that the family is interested in her possibly pursuing, this as they can foresee developing a business with Amanda taking full part in making it successful. This alternative would lead to developing housing for her in the Citrus County, area and groundwork is being laid now to make this happen. The family has developed a good working relationship with the Citrus ARC and may be able to access residential support services through them. With her strong family support and good relationships with several professionals and community resources, her visions for her future are bright. CARD's new involvement with Amanda will be focused on bringing a strong person-centered planning perspective to her team, and becoming a support for Amanda's path.

## Chris's Story

From birth, Chris seemed different. He didn't want to nurse, and he hardly slept. He developed self-injurious behaviors, didn't speak, and as a young child had no desire to play or interact with others. His parents went from doctor to doctor until they found one who recognized the signs of autism. At the time, some of the doctors recommended Chris be institutionalized. Instead, his parents determined that they would do everything in their power to help Chris. Little was known about autism then, and they faced the added frustration of being blamed for his challenges. Helping Chris became the family's mission. Their home was filled with constant teaching and learning. They tried various therapies and medications; some helped, some didn't. However, they never let his diagnosis limit his potential.

Chris, now 40, grew up in an era when school districts struggled to understand how to accommodate students with special needs, and autism in particular. His parents took matters into their own hands and poured over law books in order to fight for their son's right to a standard diploma, regardless of his diagnosis. They knew they had to give him every possible opportunity to succeed. Even though some teachers and students resisted the idea that Chris should go to school with his typical peers, his family persevered because they believed that a typical high school setting would be the most beneficial. His brother, who attended the same high school, made sure Chris was included and that no one picked on him. Chris recalls vocational experiences in high school where he learned about jobs in construction, carpentry, auto mechanics, and retail; but none of those experiences appealed to him. During his senior year, Chris' Social Studies teacher helped him get a job at a company that sold window

blinds. It didn't work out, and Chris was asked to leave. He then tried janitorial work, but that wasn't a good match either. As Chris approached graduation and adulthood, he had only his family to help him plan for life after high school. So his parents set about the job of helping Chris learn the skills he would need to function independently in the world. He learned how to do laundry and help cook while he was still in high school. His father taught him to drive, and he obtained his license by the time he graduated at seventeen. Though they were scared, Chris' parents let him drive anyway. Chris exceeded his parent's expectations. Out of more than 700 students in his graduating class, he graduated in the top 10% of his class with a standard diploma.

After high school Chris' family helped connect him to the services of a local employment program for individuals with disabilities. He was offered a temporary clerical position through a program in which his employer paid half of his salary, and the other half was paid for by the program. It was the opportunity Chris needed to demonstrate his abilities. As a temp, Chris made copies, ran errands, delivered packages, typed memos and letters, and prepared mailings. His bosses were thrilled with Chris and his work; but for the first several months he needed support. Chris didn't have the luxury of a job coach or supported employment professional. Instead, he relied on natural supports—co-workers and student interns—to provide him with the assistance he needed to learn his job duties. His family credits part of Chris' success on the job to supervisors and co-workers who were accepting of him. It also helps that Chris is an excellent employee. He often stays late and really cares about doing a great job. Within one year of taking the temporary position, Chris started working full-time and receiving benefits. He's changed departments since he originally took the job 20 years ago, but continues to enjoy his

work. Chris sorts incoming and outgoing mail and then delivers it to employees in his building. He also drives between different office locations to deliver packages and documents. He loves his job and is loved by his co-workers. Chris reveals how much working has impacted his life, "My family and my job are the most important things in my life."

After work, Chris drives to the home where he has lived on his own for almost two years. Chris acknowledges his parents' financial assistance has made it possible for him to live independently. He remembers being scared about living alone at first, but has now developed his own routines, and he likes to keep busy. He goes grocery shopping on some evenings and occasionally makes his specialty, ground beef casserole. When he's not working, Chris loves to fish and go boating with his family and volunteers his time maintaining the boats at Shake-a-leg. He also enjoys competing in fishing tournaments, diving, and snorkeling with his older brother. Chris loves being involved in his community. He has served on several consumer advisory boards, and speaks at autism awareness events. For the past few years he has set and met his own goal of raising \$1000 annually for Autism Speaks. Chris encourages others to volunteer, "I'm proud of my volunteering and speaking about autism...I have friends who I know and help, like family."

## Randy's Story

Randy is 24 years old and was diagnosed with autism as a young child. He loves spending time with his family and friends and his favorite pastime is playing basketball. He received educational services in an autism classroom until he entered a school transition program during his final years of high school. However, in the years prior to his graduation Randy's family began to explore options for life after high

school. They realized they couldn't rely solely on the existing agencies and providers that were supposed to offer services to help him gain independence. As Randy grew older, they became increasingly aware that there were not many post-secondary options for adults that require more supports in the community.

Randy uses some words but has difficulty communicating with others. His family didn't particularly care for the sheltered workshops and day programs they visited. They even considered starting a program, but because of funding barriers, it never became a reality. His mother, Sarah, says many people in the school system cared and wanted to help; however, there was little in place to really make the transition from high school to life in the community easier. She wishes that someone from the school could have acted in the role of a job developer and carved-out a job for him.

During his last two and a half years of high school, Randy attended a job training program designed specifically for individuals with autism. There, he had the opportunity to try different jobs, in different settings, with the support of a job coach. The program also included travel training and daily living skills instruction. As a result, Randy had the opportunity to work on behavioral, social, and language skills while navigating in the community. Sarah remembers seeing video of the skills Randy was learning, "They would send video footage and it gave me a chance to see his possibilities." He had the opportunity to spend time with students who talked more and modeled increased independence. Vocational Rehabilitation was not involved in Randy's IEPs until his final IEP meeting, and when they were finally at his meeting, they indicated that they couldn't offer the level of support he needed to be successfully integrated in his community. For a while, the family used their own funds to pay for a companion

for Randy. Luckily, Randy was given some options when he began receiving Medicaid Waiver services at the time that he left high school in May 2006. Randy also receives Supplemental Security Income (SSI), and the family has been involved in special needs planning.

Dissatisfied with what their community had to offer, the family decided to use the services Randy receives in order to piece together a daily routine that gives him the opportunity to interact with others and learn new skills in typical environments. They were afraid he would lose skills or flounder without the right setting. Tom, Randy's personal care assistant (PCA), together with his support coordinator, helped make the family's plan a reality. First, the family thought about the people they knew who would be willing to give Randy an opportunity. Sarah called a friend and landed Randy a volunteer position at a local clinic three days a week. With Tom at his side, Randy has been volunteering there for over a year now. Tom started by giving Randy the choice between two volunteer duties at a time. CARD helped by creating a visual schedule for Randy. Now, Randy can choose the order of his volunteer duties, and organize his day using his visual schedule. Randy's family reports that they've seen him develop even more new skills since he's been volunteering; he's more flexible when it comes to change, too. His work day begins by cleaning and re-stocking the break room with supplies. Then he goes to the therapy room, and helps clean and organize the materials there. Randy helps change the paper on exam tables and replaces the brochures in display areas. He has learned to use the copy machine, collate, staple, and fold documents using a template. He's now learning to manipulate paper clips and typing from handwritten documents. His behavior analyst has been part of the team that helps Randy succeed. She works with his



supervisor, Brenda, and the job coach to come up with ideas for easy adaptations that help Randy to be more independent. Brenda says, “I think one of the best things about having him here is how much I have learned.”

The benefits of Randy’s volunteering were obvious to his family, so they searched for another opportunity that would be a good match for Randy’s skills. Sarah met with staff from a local church and helped identify ways that her son could volunteer there. They were receptive to the idea, and he now volunteers at the church two days a week doing clerical and other duties. Now Randy has a five-day ‘work’ week that starts around nine o’clock when Randy and Tom go for a morning walk through a local mall. He arrives at the volunteer site by 10:30 am, and leaves by 1:30 pm. After lunch, Randy enjoys a recreational activity like basketball or bowling. While Randy is not paid for any of his work, that doesn’t seem to make a difference to Randy or his family. His mother remarks, “I don’t care about a paying job. I want him to happy. I want him to have a life.” She encourages families to problem solve creatively.

Randy has made his own friends, and for the first time in his life, they are independent of his family. He comes home to his family and is happy being surrounded by people who love him. In his spare time, Randy loves to watch game shows. He’s a big fan of *Wheel of Fortune*, *Jeopardy*, and *American Idol*. His family can’t help but notice how much he loves to volunteer, because his face lights up on the days he knows he will be going to the office. One co-worker said, “We love him. It’s so great to see him learn and grow.”

## Stephanie's Story

When Stephanie was a freshman in high school, her dreams were to graduate from high school, work in the community where she grew up, live in a house with a few close friends, and have a boyfriend. Stephanie's vision was crucial to her future planning. While Stephanie was creating her dream, her mother was trying to envision it. It only brought worries and woes into her life. Her daughter with autism, cognitive impairments, and Graves' disease had "big" ideas. Thinking about Stephanie as an adult was overwhelming.

Stephanie's mother's fears were real; however, she faced her fears by writing an action plan and reaching-out to others: parents with children with autism, educators, and agency consultants, including CARD, to lend a hand. Stephanie's mother knew one thing: her daughter was going to have every opportunity to make her dreams come true. She became her daughter's greatest advocate.

Stephanie's mother pulled together a team of individuals who assisted her in developing a Person-Centered Plan (PCP) for Stephanie. Stephanie and her mother invited family members, friends, school personnel, program directors, community leaders and agencies consultants to participate in this planning process. CARD facilitated the initial meetings.

Stephanie's mother utilized two tools for her daughter's PCP: Circle of Supports and Planning Alternative Tomorrows with Hope (PATH). Initially, Stephanie's Circle of Supports was difficult to develop. Stephanie and her mother could not identify many people to place in the circle. With the assistance of her high school teacher, CARD, and others, Stephanie's circle began to take shape. Stephanie's high school teacher was responsible for finding mentors and peer buddies at her

school. These individuals became her support team at school and in the community. They attended many meetings and participated in activities. Within six months, the team members placed additional names (resources and service providers) into her Circle of Supports.

Stephanie's PATH was created in her sophomore year of high school by her support team. Her dreams became the centerpiece for all round-table discussions. Members of Stephanie's team (including Stephanie) talked about long and short term goals (what was possible and what was not). Team members discussed her strengths, abilities, and talents as well as her current health condition. Elements of Stephanie's PATH were revised over time, due to her health issues. PATH goals and objectives were transferred to Stephanie's junior and senior Transition IEPs. The goals and objectives from her PATH mirrored the goals and objectives in her TIEPs. When team members lost sight of Stephanie's dreams, her mother vehemently encouraged the teachers and district personnel to focus on those dreams. Stephanie's mother and the TIEP team also made sure she had opportunities to learn work skills at school and in the community. In her senior year, Stephanie's mother requested and pressed hard for Community Based Instruction (CBI).

The school district's Transition Coordinator appreciated and understood the concerns of parents who are faced with raising and educating a student with a developmental disability. As a result, he wrote a proposal for an alternative school program. The school board reviewed and customized the program's plan before funding it; and the Transition Program was launched. Any student aged 18-21, enrolled in an exceptional education program on a special diploma track, and living in the district was able to apply. The program was centered on students' desires to develop work skills in the

community and to enhance adult daily living skills. The curriculum differed for each individual, but included job development, job seeking, resume construction, job application familiarity, volunteer experiences, social skills development, adult daily living skills, and leisure activity enhancement. Stephanie was one of the first students to apply.

Over the years, Stephanie sampled job after job. Her impressive resume includes:

- Publix – stocking shelves and bagging groceries
- Wal-Mart – straightening shelves and shelving return items
- K-Mart - stocking and straightening shelves and hanging new clothes on racks
- Shoney's - bussing tables and rolling silverware into napkins
- Pizza Hut – assembling boxes
- Home Depot – potting and watering plants and shelving return items
- Zoo - preparing food and feeding the animals, cleaning cages, washing windows, repairing a boardwalk going to the children's zoo, and working in the zoo's café (this was one of her most memorable jobs)

This summer, Stephanie will start a new life as an adult. As an adult, she will go to work (with a job coach). Stephanie has a job working in the housekeeping department at a local resort. She will be a part-time employee, working three days a week. The housekeeping supervisor is looking forward to the day Stephanie will start her job. She has observed Stephanie

on many occasions (during her CBI training), vacuuming and dusting guest rooms. The supervisor likes what she sees. She says Stephanie is hard-working, conscientious, and pleasant.

Stephanie has applied for other jobs in her community. She hopes to work part-time at K-Mart in the stock room. Stephanie enjoys taking the new clothes from boxes and hanging them on clothes racks. She likes to see the latest fashion trends in the clothing industry.

Stephanie fills her day with other activities as well. She performs chores at home (which she enjoys), cooks meals and makes snacks, and exercises at the local YMCA with a personal trainer. Stephanie also wants to volunteer in the community a couple of hours per week. Stephanie continues to live at home with her family. Her family situation is changing, and feels she has to remain at home for now.

Stephanie has joined Ben's Place, a social club network for individuals with and without developmental disabilities. The mission of Ben's Place is to provide a "safe, wholesome and friendly setting ... that fosters community inclusion, social interaction and independence." Members of Ben's Place get together on a regular basis to have fun. Although, Stephanie is not dating, there is a possibility that she may meet someone. Activities at Ben's Place include: pool, ping pong, card and board games, karaoke and dancing.

Stephanie is receiving the government benefits that support individuals with autism. These include: Medicaid Waiver, Social Security Supplemental Income, and Medicaid. Her mother has set-up a Pooled Trust in her daughter's name, and has drafted her Will. Stephanie's mother is working with consultants at the Independent Living Resource Center to learn more about Social Security work incentive benefits and programs (e.g. Ticket-to-Work).

In the future, Stephanie hopes to work part-time at K-Mart, gain more independence, and get a dog. Stephanie's mother has another future vision for her adult daughter. She wants her to have a healthier life-style. The UF Jacksonville Health and Transition Service (JaxHATS) is a program which assists individuals with developmental disabilities and other chronic illnesses to live healthier lives. Stephanie was referred to this program and soon will be working with a variety of specialists who will help her plan, create, and monitor her personal health.

What makes this a success story? Stephanie appears happy and she seems to enjoy her new life. She wants to talk about her day and the people she meets. She enjoys being in the community with other adults, and she enjoys adult activities. Stephanie's Circle of Supports is full! Many people know, support and accepted her for who she is in her community. Stephanie is doing what she set out to do-- to graduate from high school and get a job in her community. Although, she has not met all her goals (living in a house with a few close friends or finding a boyfriend), she remains optimistic. She has plenty of friends and allies (not all have disabilities) to share her dreams.

## Kevin's Story

It's never too early. From his family's perspective, a key component to Kevin's success was identifying a post school outcome early on and having it consistently identified in Kevin's IEP. While goals will change over the years, the post school outcome was a steady focus that guided his academic curriculum and school support.

Kevin is an amazing young man. Although he has difficulties such as carrying on conversations with others, understanding abstract concepts, making friends, and tolerating dogs, Kevin's family always felt he was capable of finding and holding a job. Kevin's long term goal of community based employment was incorporated into his individualized education plan (IEP) as early as 5th grade.

Kevin's dream to graduate from high school and get a job the community directly aligned with his IEP goals for independence. As Kevin got older, his educational curriculum focused more heavily on community based instruction (CBI), providing him with the opportunity to learn with a "hands on" approach outside of the classroom setting. Kevin was given the opportunity to gain skills and experience in a variety of environments including: a restaurant, kitchen, office, and commercial laundry facility. These experiences were valuable stepping stones towards Kevin's transition. In these "real world" settings, Kevin's work habits, strengths, and challenges could be observed. This information helped inform his IEP goals each year. The focus on a CBI curriculum continued through both middle school and high school. Each year, his goals were updated to reflect the progress he made and new skills he gained within the previous year.

In high school, Kevin had two Person Centered Futures Planning meetings utilizing the PATH tool. Consultants at CARD facilitated these meetings with the individuals most important in Kevin's life, including professionals from a variety of agencies, school personnel, family members, community members, and, of course, Kevin himself. The purpose of these meetings was to create a crystallized vision for the future and to identify short and long term goals. Having the participation of so many key players or "PATH finders" allowed for the group to find ways of supporting Kevin in meeting these goals

using paid, school, social service, and natural supports. This helped to keep everyone supporting Kevin "on the same page." Kevin's PATH goals were infused into the other specific plans in his life such as his IEP, individualized support plan (ISP) through the Agency for Persons with Disabilities, and his individualized plan for employment (IPE) with Vocational Rehabilitation.

The key players in maintaining the momentum of this process were family members and school staff, working together as a team, with Kevin's future as their focus. Over the years, Kevin was fortunate to work with many dedicated professionals. Kevin's family was particularly adept at being the able to collaborate with social service providers and school personnel while advocating for Kevin's continued growth and success. Creating and maintaining relationships with those supporting Kevin was a key component of his ultimate success.

When Kevin and his family were challenged by professionals or school personnel who did not share his vision for the future, they were able to remain composed and collaborative, and worked through the concern. Kevin's parents recalled those moments as the most challenging. They were always mindful that unproductive disagreements with individuals on Kevin's IEP team could only serve to burn a bridge with the same circle of support he might need to access in the future.

Kevin's CBI time continued to increase through high school. By his last year of high school, he was spending the first part of his day working in the school office sorting, counting out, and delivering newspapers around campus. After completing this on-campus job, he would take a cab to volunteer in a community laundry facility, with support from a job coach or transition assistant. This community based



volunteer experience allowed Kevin to gain a higher level of independence and develop a variety of new job skills.

Of course, there were stumbling blocks along the way. The biggest challenge occurred during an IEP meeting in the spring of Kevin's junior year. The district job coach told Kevin and his family that she felt he "wasn't a candidate for competitive employment." Rather than allowing the IEP team meeting to become a debate of personal opinions, Kevin's family remained committed to working through the challenge collaboratively. The job coach's opinion regarding Kevin's candidacy for competitive employment was based solely on her subjective observations. Kevin had not had a vocational assessment nor had she collected data on his work productivity. Since Kevin's IEP goals were directly aligned with working within the community upon graduation, and there was no data to support changing these goals, his family was able to strongly advocate for increased job coach support. This moment was perhaps the greatest highlight of his family's ability to continue to work productively to collaborate as a team instead of arguing. Their response to the job coach's comments was, "You might be right. Kevin may not be successful in a competitive work site, but we won't know until we try. Working within his community has been one of the main goals on his IEPs since 5th grade, and he deserves the chance to attain that goal."

This point was factual, and had been documented in his IEP since 5<sup>th</sup> grade. Having those post high school goals outlined early on provided a context to the services and supports Kevin and his family were requesting. Ultimately, Kevin was able to access job coaching during his last year of high school.

Collaborating and brainstorming with other parents and professionals also played a part in Kevin's successful

transition. During the Adult Services Pre-conference day networking session at the annual CARD conference, Kevin's family heard about the idea of creating a video resume. Since Kevin's communication and social skills were his greatest challenges, this idea seemed like an interesting alternative to the formal interviewing process. The idea of creating a video resume was incorporated into Kevin's PATH plan, with various individuals contributing to the process. During Kevin's last year of high school, he was able to access assistance in developing his video resume through a contractor with the school system. They spent a significant amount of time shadowing Kevin in his high school as well as his CBI work site performing a variety of jobs.

"The Kevin Show," Kevin's completed video resume, was taken to a commercial laundry facility within his local community. The video resume enabled the potential employer to see Kevin's strengths first, his challenges second. It became the catalyst for Kevin's entry into the company, and based his video resume, Kevin was offered the job before the managers at the company even met him.

Kevin began working full time in February of 2006. Because he was still enrolled in high school, Kevin was able to access support for this transition through the school system. He was provided with a job coach assistant on a full time basis, who helped him learn the job and the work routines. She went to work with him full time, from February through early May, gradually fading her support and services as his graduation date approached. Kevin's job was a particularly good fit for him. The work environment highlighted his strengths and capabilities while minimizing traits, such as singing, that might be problematic in other settings.

Following graduation, Kevin's supported employment services were provided by a private agency through funding from the Medicaid Waiver, and he continues to have a job coach, who visits him a couple of times a week. Kevin has now remained employed with this company for over two years. His supervisors, managers, and co-workers are extremely supportive of Kevin, and they look forward to continuing to help him develop as a valued employee.

Kevin currently lives at home with his parents & siblings. He has a close relationship with his sister, 22, and his brother, 17. Kevin has his own room, and enjoys listening to music and watching videos during his free time. He has an incredible memory and continuously sings songs and recites dialogue from TV shows and videos. Kevin can recite the song lists of all his CDs and the year they were recorded. He can tell you who starred in a movie, who produced it, and the year it was made. He loves to browse through music and video stores. He enjoys bowling a couple of days a week, and swimming during the summer.

Kevin works full time, Monday through Friday. Kevin looks forward to going to work. He gets himself up every morning, takes a shower, and assists with preparing his breakfast and packing his lunch. One of the challenges Kevin now faces is accessing reliable transportation to and from work. The public bus schedule doesn't coincide with Kevin's work schedule, and taxi services are unable to commit to timely consistent pick up and drop off. Kevin and his family continue to investigate transportation options, but currently sharing the responsibility with his paid support personnel. Kevin usually rides to work with his family, and has a companion pick him up. Kevin's companion also assists him with completing household chores.

Kevin's job not only provides him with a daily routine and purpose, it has also been a huge source of personal gratification. He proudly wears his work hat and walks confidently around the job site. Kevin has developed a large circle of support at work. His co-workers are caring and compassionate people who are always willing to support him. Since obtaining his job, Kevin's work managers have expressed, on more than one occasion, seeing an improvement in his social skills over time. They are thrilled to see him now independently initiating interactions with others, and they take pride in Kevin's social growth. Kevin gets paid on a weekly basis and goes shopping for a new CD or DVD each week. Kevin enjoys being a "working man," and it is obvious that he is proud of his job.

Kevin would like to continue working at his current job. He would also like to expand the range of duties he performs and increase his work productivity level. Kevin will continue to use a job coach to support him in the work environment and act as a liaison between home and work.

In the future, Kevin and his family would like to support his social relationships and social opportunities with typical peers. The leisure activities that Kevin participates in are limited to those individuals with developmental disabilities. Although Kevin has relationships with a variety of individuals through work, he does not have any friends without disabilities his own age. Kevin and his family are currently pursuing a variety of ideas to help incorporate more social opportunities with typically developing peers.

While enjoying his past success, Kevin is also focused on new goals and dreams. Kevin's next big transition will be finding a "home." Ideally, Kevin would like to live in a supported living arrangement or other supported environment

that will continue to promote his independence. While Kevin hasn't found a perfect match as of yet, he and those who support him continue to pursue making his dream of a home a reality.

Everyone who has supported Kevin in pursuit of his dreams and goals feels a sense of pride and accomplishment. While those that supported him, particularly his family, were critical in helping secure the opportunity for Kevin to pursue employment, once he got his foot in the door, Kevin earned the respect and admiration of all those who work with him. Their efforts gave him the chance; he has proven he can do it on his own merit.

Ultimately it is in the synergy of all the professionals, family, and community members who helped make Kevin's story a success. The ability for a group of individuals to develop a course of action they could support given a variety of backgrounds, perspectives, and opinions was crucial. Kevin's grandfather, a participant in Kevin's PATH plan, remarked, "I didn't think anything on that list would be accomplished." What seemed like lofty goals at the time now seem like distant benchmarks that have come and gone. Kevin has developed into a unique interesting young man. It is a pleasure for everyone who has supported Kevin to see him living his dream and making a contribution to his community.

When individuals who have never met Kevin hear his story, they often assume that he has Asperger Syndrome or is "high functioning." Kevin has autism. He has severe challenges in the areas of socialization, communication, and awareness. His successes are illustrative of what opportunity, capitalizing on strengths, and having adequate community supports can do in the life of an individual who was told he

could never work. Kevin's successes to this point have astonished everyone who has worked with him. He is a living example of how given opportunity and support, anything is possible.

## Summary

These remarkable celebrations of success share several themes. The importance of collaboration, long-range vision, and planning are highlighted across the stories. Families, honoring the dreams of their adolescent children, however improbable, have seized on the possible instead of being deterred by the barriers they faced on their journey. Mentors and other champions in the service community have supported the growth and independence of these adults, and have developed creative solutions to problems they encountered. Also highlighted in the stories is the important role that family and friends played in identifying and securing employment opportunities that match the interests and strengths of their children. Although the Florida Department of Education figures for all exceptional education students indicate 56% of students were either employed or enrolled in post-secondary education programs, only 26% of students with autism were able to achieve these outcomes. More support and help is needed to close this gap. CARD is hopeful that these stories will encourage families, service providers, schools, and individuals with an autism spectrum disorder to aim high to achieve post-high school ambitions.