

breaking ground

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AbleVoices

Sharing who we are through photographs

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Council on
Developmental Disabilities

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Jen Vogus works with Franklin High Transition II student, Anna Winter, before heading out for a photo scavenger hunt while teaching assistant, Laverne Holland observes. Photo by Robin Conover



Cover photo:

Ravenwood High Transition II student, Bethany, focuses her camera on a bee interacting with a flower. Photo by Jen Vogus.

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Tennessee Business Enterprise

One of our state's best-kept secrets

by Sharon Paris-Treadway, Partners in Policymaking® 2010-11 Graduate

For over 75 years, blind individuals have operated vending locations on federal, state, and municipal properties. The Randolph Shepherd Act of 1936 established this program in federal locations. A few years later, Tennessee passed its own version of the Randolph Shepherd Act, which included state and local government locations.

Tennessee Business Enterprise (TBE) is overseen by the Department of Human Services' Blind Services. We now have 104 blind managers operating approximately 120 locations in Tennessee.

So, why have you never heard of this great business opportunity? We're not sure why it's such a big secret, but we believe it's time to let Tennesseans know who we are.

The national unemployment rate for the blind hovers around 75%. Yet Business Enterprise programs are in 49 of the 50 states and all offer the same chance for self-employment.

Many years ago, TBE was thought to be the last resort for a blind person wanting to succeed and have gainful employment. Today, that is not the case. We no longer just sell pencils and candy. We operate food service locations, large vending routes, college campus vending, micro markets, and over half of the county jail inmate commissaries in the state. TBE is a multi-million dollar enterprise and growing every year.

What can TBE do for someone? First, let me say that it is the very best decision I ever made. I was a single mom of a nine-year-old, had never worked outside the home, and felt that I had no real skills. I did an evaluation at the Tennessee Rehabilitation Center for college and heard from a student about the vending program. He said I should try it, that I seemed like a good fit. I had my doubts; I was very shy and had low self-esteem. But I did have a determination to take care of myself and my daughter, and this sounded like a much faster result than going to college.

My program director set it up and I was on my way. I had no idea that 23 years later, I would still be so ener-

gized about this job opportunity. It is not an easy job, and it takes a lot of planning and organization. But it is definitely worth all the time and energy.

My years have not been without challenges, but I don't know any business owner who doesn't have those from time to time. I don't believe that the challenges I've experienced have been any more complex because of my blindness.

Managers in the TBE program are self-employed and are responsible for all parts of the business, from supervising employees, to ordering stock, to all the paperwork. There is an extensive training program and internship that each person must go through before they are licensed.

We are looking for people to join the team. If you think you have the skills and desire to be successful, please reach out to your Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor, visit <https://www.tn.gov/humanservices/ds/bvis-tn-business-enterprises.html>, or call 615-313-4914. Your first step is opening a Vocational Rehabilitation case; that first step could change your life.



Sharon Paris-Treadway stops by Davy Crockett Tower to service its vending machines.

A Few Thoughts about Relationships

by Amy Petulla, Partners in Policymaking® 2001-02 Graduate

As parents of children and adults with disabilities, we spend a lot of time dealing with things we consider essential, like education, services, and medical care. The list goes on and on, as do the books, workshops, and materials you can find on those subjects. But there is one important area in anyone's life that does not get much attention: RELATIONSHIPS. While everyone has to deal with relationship issues, our kids have some different challenges in this area. If we just put our heads in the sand because there are so many other urgent things to take care of, we are doing them a disservice.

We need to SUPPORT our children in their relationship choices, rather than create relationships for them and run those the way we think they should run. If we truly want our children to achieve as much independence as possible, we need to let go and trust our adult or

near-adult sons and daughters to be in the driver's seat while we give some guidance, rather than taking over the wheel. Scary prospect? Sure. But if you are reading this magazine, odds are good you already have a commitment to empowering people who live with challenges to be as independent as possible. This article is about trying to walk that walk.

Relationships DEFINE life. Our relationships make us the humans we are. From the time someone first told us they suspected our child might have a disability, the whole family entered a world filled with relationships that are completely alien to people that live solely in "typical world." Some may look the same, like relationships with other parents, teachers, and medical personnel. But even those connections, in our world, can take on a more challenging aspect.

But those are not the associations we're discussing here. I am talking about our adult children's social and dating relationships. While they have the same need for companionship as others, intellectual, communication, and emotional issues can interfere with their ability to fulfill those needs. We as parents should step up to provide guidance, yet resist that urge to direct who they should see and how they should conduct their friendships.

My son, Chris, recently had his first girlfriend, Karrie. He has wanted a girlfriend for years, but was too shy to ask a girl out. That can be a pretty significant stumbling block. I tried to encourage him to ask this or that young lady out. I tried to get him to practice asking for a date, but that is not something a young man wants to do with his mother. He had a male mentor that worked with him through a state program. Chris saw him as a friend, and would listen to and practice with him, but shifting those skills to real life was not easy. However, for those searching for strategies for a child with similar issues, I recommend finding a same-sex peer that your child considers a friend, to talk with them and maybe practice some ways to start conversations.

Here's another suggestion for helping your child tiptoe through those first steps of a romantic friendship: if you have organized social activities for young adults with



left to right: Family members Melody, Chris and Amy Petulla

disabilities in your community, you might suggest they consider a Sadie Hawkins dance, where girls ask the guys to dance. From what I've seen, many young ladies are more social and more open to social interaction. An activity that not only allows but requires them to take charge on this could be good for both. If your community does not have such events, try approaching some groups to see if they would consider taking that on. Chattanooga's Therapeutic Recreation division of Parks and Recreation runs a "Chillin' Like Villains" social group for young adults that meets once a month. It is a wonderful opportunity! Let's face it: once school is done, many social opportunities end. Sports and the group Best Buddies also allow young adults to mix and mingle in a relaxed social setting.

date to a friend or even sibling whose behavior would provide a good model. Movies or television shows are often where our kids learn "acceptable" social behavior, so it's a good idea to be aware of what media is playing in your home and, if necessary, steer away from shows that might be sending the wrong message, or discuss the parts that are problematic.

Things between Chris and Karrie were rosy for several months, but every rose, as they say, has its thorn. Some of their personality differences and aspects of their disabilities made it difficult for them to be happy together. Eventually, Chris decided he needed to end the relationship. Of course, it would be easier for all of us if we could just say, "Mom, handle this for me," but part of the growing up process is learning how to handle those

“From the time someone first told us they suspected our child might have a disability, the whole family entered a world filled with relationships that are completely alien to people that live solely in ‘typical world.’”

When Chris and Karrie first met, she walked right up to him, took his hand, and declared he was her "Tennessee boyfriend" (since at the time she lived in a different state). An assertive girl was exactly what he needed. Her mother, Sue, and I did what we could to both promote the relationship and allow them some privacy. Again, Chris's support worker through Employment and Community First CHOICES was a wonderful asset. He practiced with Chris certain social aspects - conversation, holding the door, standing if she left the table to be polite, and the like. He drove them to a dinner date and sat at a different table, so that they could be in their own space. We planned events where they could be together with us nearby - going out to eat, exploring Chattanooga's attractions, visits at home.

Had they wanted more independence from us, we would have arranged it, but Sue and I were relieved the relationship was proceeding at a very slow pace. However, that is not always the case. Some parents have to learn early on how to discuss appropriate public behavior, which can be an uncomfortable conversation. Again, peers can be very helpful in this regard. Rather than a discussion, peer modeling can provide an easier and more effective lesson. Suggest an occasional double

sticky situations. As parents in general, and particularly as the parent of someone with an intellectual disability, we want to protect them from pain. But if we are serious about this independence thing, we've got to let go.

What can we do to support them? We can be there to listen. We can be there to offer advice. But our kids with disabilities may be less likely to say they want advice. They are also more likely to take our advice as commands, so we have to tread carefully through that minefield. The best way to do that is to be willing to listen, and to talk, even if it means having the same conversation over and over. Sometimes, I don't know if Chris is asking me the same thing 15 times because he didn't understand what I said, or that he was hoping for a different answer! The emotional complexity of a breakup paired with the difficulty of grasping complex social norms make these more challenging lessons. Yet they are important lessons that will help them lead a healthy and full life.

Hopefully this article has given you some food for thought, and perhaps some tools along the way. So buckle up; if you have a teen or young adult heading down the path of romantic relationships, it can be a bumpy but exciting ride!

Exploring a Spectrum of New Opportunities

by Emmanuel Mejeun, Director of Full Spectrum Learning, and Lisa Mejeun, MA, NCC

Dr. Stephen Shore once said, "If you've met one person with autism, you've met one person with autism." Many new studies are helping us understand more about the autism spectrum. Unfortunately, studies alone are not enough to improve life for people with autism.

As children, many with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) experience discrimination from the beginning of their academic and social lives. With common challenges like sensitivity to light or sound, literal interpretation of conversations, and lack of emotional control, it can be difficult for students to relate to others.

Many children diagnosed with ASD receive accommodations through the public school system to help them

engage in social, emotional, and academic activities required to graduate. However, until recently, once a student with ASD graduated from high school, there were few opportunities when it came to college. Luckily, some colleges are creating programs designed to help students with ASD succeed.

Austin Peay's Full Spectrum Learning (FSL) program is for students with ASD who want to earn a four-year college degree, transition into the workforce, and lead a positive and productive life. This includes a special weekly course for students to focus on academic, social, and career strategies. The program also has one-on-one conferences, peer and faculty mentors, tutors, and study time.



Students in Austin Peay's Full Spectrum Learning program enjoying the campus's green spaces



FSL offers its students other benefits. Participants learn more about the university and the Clarksville community. They enhance their motivation, self-discipline and goal setting with a peer mentor. Mentors help students grow strategies for coping in social environments, increase their social and academic confidence, and make decisions about their lives. Participants also mention that they enjoy making new friends and having fun.

Faculty mentors, chosen by the FSL student, introduce students to important connections in the local university and broader professional communities. This helps students connect to job possibilities and opportunities for leadership and engagement in professional organizations. It also helps the students to develop skills associated with career readiness, such as critical thinking and problem solving, oral and written communication, teamwork, and professionalism and work ethic. As the faculty mentors become more familiar with the students, they offer acceptance, confirmation, admiration, and emotional support.

FSL participants can receive tutoring for any of their courses. FSL collaborates with the university's academic support center to provide each participant with certified tutors. FSL students report that they feel at ease

with a peer tutor, which allows them to stay on task and ultimately improve their academic skills. Peer tutoring also helps build personal relationships between the tutor and the student. FSL partners with the Office of Disability Services to train professors to create a more effective teaching environment, by reducing the stigma of accommodations, and making them aware of possible sensory triggers.

For some individuals with ASD, preparing for a career is the ultimate goal. For those students who have dreamt of a position requiring a four-year degree, the Full Spectrum Learning Program at Austin Peay is a wonderful opportunity. With a focus on academic strategies and success, students can gain an education and much more. The design of this program encourages these individuals to achieve their full potential.

To qualify for the Full Spectrum Learning Program, prospective students are required to submit official documentation of their ASD diagnosis; however, they do not have further GPA or testing requirements beyond the admission requirements of the Austin Peay Admission Office. For more information visit www.apsu.edu/full-spectrum-learning or call 931-221-7543.

AbleVoices *Sharing who*

by Jen Vogus, Partners in Policymaking® 2006-07 Graduate

Last March, I organized a field trip for Centennial and Franklin High (Williamson County) Transition II (18-21 year-old) special education students to view their photographs that were on exhibit at the Vanderbilt Kennedy Center. The photos were a result of the project *AbleVoices: Sharing Who We Are Through Our Photographs*. After viewing the exhibit, I asked the students, "How does it feel to have your photos hanging on the walls of Vanderbilt University?" They all cheered, and one student said, "My mind is blown!" This energy and excitement also sums up how I've felt over the past few years as I've developed and now lead *AbleVoices* photography projects across the Williamson County school district.

AbleVoices is a hands-on photography program based on the "photo-voice" approach developed in 1993 by researchers Caroline Wang and



PHOTO BY JEN VOGUS

Markus and Alex sharing images with each other from an outdoor photo scavenger hunt at River Park

MaryAnn Burris. Photovoice provides cameras to those who often aren't heard to give them opportunities to create pictures as a means of communication, self-expression, and self-

advocacy. On a personal level, people can build their social skills, increase their photography knowledge and skills, and grow more confident. On a broader level, there can be positive change from community members seeing the gifts of the participants and learning more about how they see the world.

The goal of *AbleVoices* is to provide the tools and training for participants to create images that communicate their preferences, interests, strengths, and goals for the future, as well as to promote inclusion of individuals with disabilities in the world. The final part of an *AbleVoices* project is to hang the photographs with captions in a gallery so family, friends, and the community can learn about and celebrate the photographers.



PHOTO BY ROBIN CONOVER

Sam and Jon enjoying photographing outdoors during the AbleVoices project

we are through photographs

AbleVoices has been a blend of a decade's worth of my experiences, research, and passion. I am an educator, a photographer, and a parent of a 17-year-old son with physical and intellectual disabilities. When Aidan began school, he was (and is) nonverbal and had few ways to communicate with his teachers and peers. So I began taking pictures of Aidan's interests and capabilities and sent the photos with captions to school with him. This opened up Aidan's world, and his teachers and peers truly got to know him as a person, creating lasting, positive relationships. It was these early experiences that planted the seed of *AbleVoices*. The power of photography became clear to me, and I wanted to use it to help others

whose voices may not be heard.

I am drawn to young adults transitioning from school to adulthood because it is such a critical time in their lives, when important changes occur. For many of these students, communication is one of their biggest challenges. I see photography as a helpful way for students to visually express their strengths and interests and to help them communicate their future life goals. Images can show in an instant what words or text take much longer to express. In other words, I see it as an additional way for the photographers to practice speaking up for their needs, sharing their preferences and interests, and making decisions about their future. Research tells us the more opportu-



PHOTO BY JEN VOGUS

Nico sharing the portrait he made of his teacher



PHOTO BY ROBIN CONOVER

Jen Vogus explains features and how to focus on a subject with the new cameras students received. The gathered Franklin High Transition II students are eager to go to the recreation center for an outdoor scavenger hunt.

PHOTO BY LEVA WHITE



Jen and Franklin High Transition II students gather around to discuss a photograph at the Frist Art Museum.

PHOTO BY ABLE VOICES VOLUNTEER



Centennial High Transition II student, William, shares with Jen why his photo is important to him.

PHOTO BY JEN VOGUS



Franklin HS Transition II student, Daniel, composes his shot at Radnor Lake.

PHOTO BY JEN VOGUS



Franklin HS Transition II student, Louis, proudly shows off his project photos after hanging them for an exhibit.

nities students have to discuss their interests and preferences, explain their goals, and actively plan for their future, the more control they will have over their own lives.

Working with a different Transition II (18-21 year-old) class each semester, students participate in lots of activities. We start by getting to know each other. Then students are provided with digital cameras and first learn how to use them by engaging in photo scavenger hunts. We discuss the best ways to take a good photo so they are better able to tell their visual story. We look at lots of pictures that start interesting class discussions, and also take multiple field trips to view photography exhibits and take photographs.

Finally, students write captions for the photos they took that they want to exhibit, we mount and frame them, hang their pictures in the gallery, and have an opening reception celebrating them and their work.

When school is out, the photographers can participate in an *AbleVoices* Summer Photography Club, and have shown photos during the Franklin Art Scene. With these exhibits, several students have sold their photos, with all proceeds going directly to the student photographer.

The success of *AbleVoices* relies on multiple forms of support. Sharon Bottorff, Executive Director of The Arc Williamson County, helped us find a "home" in the Williamson

PHOTO BY JEN VOGUS



Ravenwood High School Transition class proudly pose in

County Community Services Building for our photo galleries. The Arc Williamson County also provides the space for our receptions, and assists with our donations and grants that fund the cameras, photo printing, and programming costs. I am also thankful for Williamson County's Marie Wicks, Maria Griego, and the Transition II teachers for welcoming me into their classrooms. Lastly, I'm grateful to all of the students. It truly is a joy and honor for me to work with these young adults and get to experience all they are capable of doing through their photographs!

If you're interested in seeing these great artists' work, please visit *AbleVoices* exhibits at the Williamson

County Community Services building (129 W. Fowlkes St., Franklin) for ongoing exhibits, Franklin City Hall (Sept-Oct 2019)

, Parthenon Museum (Oct 2019-Jan 2020), Tennessee Performing Arts Center's Polk Theater Gallery (May-July 2020), and Vanderbilt Kennedy Center (Sep-Dec 2020). Keep up to date on all we are doing on Facebook (@ablevoices), Instagram (@ablevoices), YouTube (AbleVoices), or our website (www.ablevoices.org)!

Jen Vogus is a 2007 Partners in Policymaking® Leadership Institute graduate and a board member of The Arc Tennessee. You can contact her at jen@ablevoices.org.



PHOTO BY JEN VOGUS

Ravenwood High Transition II students, Grady and Bethany, share their photos during an outdoor photo scavenger hunt.



front of their AbleVoices exhibit they just finished hanging at the Tennessee Performing Arts Center (TPAC).

Tennessee Governor Bill Lee Appoints Six New Council Members

Tennessee Governor Bill Lee appointed six new members to a three-year term on the Council on Developmental Disabilities, effective July 1. We are pleased to welcome these new members. They represent the Council in their local districts and connect our statewide work to the needs of people with disabilities in their own communities. If one of these new members is from your district, you are welcome to reach out with ideas and input for the Council. For a full list of Council members, see our website or the back page of this publication. The new Members are:



South Central – Chrissy Hood

Chrissy Hood lives in Pulaski and is the mother of a teenage daughter with Phelan McDermid Syndrome, autism, epilepsy, cerebral palsy, and several complex medical conditions. Passionate about increasing access to information in rural communities for families who are impacted by disability, Chrissy founded the Connecting to Journey: Special Needs Support Group for caregivers of children with disabilities. Chrissy also serves as family liaison and volunteer for the Unlimited Special Needs Ministry at her local church.



Mid Cumberland - Alison Bynum

Alison Bynum of Smyrna is the primary caregiver for her two daughters, one of whom has cerebral palsy and complex medical needs. Alison attended Middle Tennessee State University and does freelance photography and marketing for small businesses. She and her husband, Brad, are active members of LifePoint Church, Stewarts Creek Campus. Alison graduated from the Council's Partners in Policymaking® Leadership Institute in 2019 and serves on the Family Advisory Council for Monroe Carell, Jr. Children's Hospital at Vanderbilt.



Upper Cumberland - Sarah Cripps

Sarah Cripps has been blind since birth. Sarah attended public school in DeKalb County from kindergarten through twelfth grade. She holds a BA in history from Tennessee Tech and a Doctorate of Jurispru-

dence from Vanderbilt University. Sarah maintains a solo law practice as a general practitioner in Smithville. Sarah is a recognized community leader, both personally and professionally. She recently served as a commencement speaker for Tennessee Tech.



Northwest - Brigham Scallion

Brigham Scallion lives in Bells and is the father of a teenage daughter with Down syndrome. He has degrees from Pikeville College, University of Memphis, and Lambuth University. He currently works as an Assistant Professor of Biology at Dyersburg State Community College and has volunteered through the Down Syndrome Association of West Tennessee.



Memphis Delta - Linda Monterroso

Linda Monterroso lives in Memphis and has a younger brother with a developmental disability who lives in their home state of New York. Linda recently moved to Tennessee to begin working as Manager of Clinical Research Operations at St. Jude Children's Research Hospital. She has degrees from George Washington University, Mount Sinai School of Medicine, and New York University. She is involved in the statewide sibling support network, TN Adult Brothers and Sisters (TABS), which is coordinated by the Council and Vanderbilt Kennedy Center. She also volunteers with St. Jude's Women's Club.



At-Large - Brent Wiles

Brent Wiles is Senior Vice President at Bridge Public Affairs in Nashville. He previously worked 16 years in the United States Senate, most recently as State Director for Senator Bob Corker. Brent also served as Professional Staff on the Senate Appropriations Committee and in various legislative roles for Senator Lamar Alexander. Brent graduated from the University of Tennessee in 2001 and lives in Nashville with his wife and three young sons, the youngest of whom has Down syndrome.

Toward Closing the Disability Voting Gap

by Disability Rights Tennessee Staff

Voting is a fundamental right for American citizens, and one of the most basic ways we can engage with our community. At the end of an election, each vote counts the same, whether a voter has a disability or not. At Disability Rights Tennessee, we are devoted to ensuring every Tennessean has access to vote, regardless of their ability.

Identifying barriers

During the 2016 election, Tennessee ranked 49th in the nation in voter participation among people with disabilities. Only 47.1% of eligible voters cast a ballot, according to a Rutgers University study. That same study found there was an 8% gap in voting participation between people with and without disabilities, meaning that voters without disabilities voted 8% more than voters with disabilities. This is called the disability voter gap and is a factor across the country.

One explanation for the gap is the presence of accessibility barriers at poll sites. These barriers range from not being able to physically access a polling place to not having trained poll workers who can assist voters with disabilities. According to a 2012 Rutgers University study, 30% of voters with disabilities nationally reported difficulty with voting, while only 8% of voters without disabilities reported difficulty. A Government Accountability Office study surveyed 178 poll sites for accessibility in 2016 and found that 60% had one or more potential barriers to voting. The GAO report findings are generally consistent with what we observe.

Disability Rights Tennessee (DRT) works with voters, county election officials, and the state election commission to ensure that voters have access to voting in Tennessee. One of our most important activities is surveying poll sites across the state during active statewide elec-

tions. In 2018, staff surveyed more than 300 poll sites across Tennessee. The data collected from survey results are shared with each county in an effort to remedy barriers. We also take calls from voters who experience problems voting on Election Day and work with their county election officials to resolve issues.

Always improving

As voting trends change, so do the ways we address them. At DRT, we are constantly improving our work to get a clearer picture of the barriers that voters with disabilities face across Tennessee. DRT was recently awarded a grant from the Tennessee Council on Developmental Disabilities and has purchased sophisticated data analytics software that will allow us to better perform poll-site accessibility surveys and track poll sites over time. This software will also allow us to run reports to help identify trends or common problems. We hope to use this data-driven approach to improve the training of poll workers and to work with county and state election officials to reduce barriers to voting for people across Tennessee. Eventually, we hope to become a national leader in understanding the barriers that exist for voters with disabilities. We will be piloting the new software during Nashville's mayoral election in August 2019.

Through the same grant from the Council, we are also seeking to address gaps in voter registration by developing resources to help Tennesseans with disabilities get registered to vote. Voter registration is another area where significant gaps exist between people with and without disabilities. The Rutgers University study identified that people with disabilities are registered to vote at about the same rate as people without disabilities.



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Story Time with a Twist

by Maria Sochor, Director, Tennessee Library for Accessible Books and Media
Tennessee State Library and Archives

Story time is popular at public libraries throughout the country, but story time events at the Tennessee State Library and Archives have a special twist. Instead of performing with groups of eager children crowded at her feet, the librarian is reading books aloud in mostly empty rooms.

The audience – children with vision impairments or other disabilities that make reading standard print books difficult – listen to the stories each month via telephone conference call. While they're listening, the children make crafts that relate to the stories they are hearing, mailed to them ahead of time by the librarian. Each month's event also includes a song and simple movements that can be easily modified to meet each child's needs.

The Tennessee Library for Accessible Books and Media (TLABM, formerly Library for the Blind and Physically Handicapped), a division of Library and Archives, developed the first-of-its-kind program as a way to reach people with disabilities across Tennessee who might never visit a public library. "Virtual story time" is a program that libraries in other states could adopt in their own communities.

The goal of this program is to give the library's patrons with disabilities access to a service readily available to people with sight at most libraries. The feedback from these efforts has been wonderful. The children are engaging with

us during the calls; children who never would have had a chance to interact with each other now have that chance.

That was true for Christian Buchanan, an eight-year-old Woodbury, Tennessee resident who is featured in a video about this project. You can find the video by searching YouTube for "virtual story time TN" or visiting the Secretary of State's YouTube channel at www.youtube.com/c/sectre-hargett. While Christian listened to the story, "You Nest Here with Me," being read aloud, he built a bird's nest out of materials TLABM sent to him and shared the experience with others on the call. The phone lines aren't muted, so participants are able to speak up on the phone, just as they would if they were meeting together. This allows them to engage with the story reader and other participants.

Lacey Buchanan, Christian's mother, said TLABM's story time sessions help her son learn about the outside world. "Having the phone call and the interactivity, they are made for him," Buchanan said. "It's not that their disabilities are highlighted, but their needs are highlighted. A need is getting met. For him to get to be conversational, to me, that's the best part of it."

The Tennessee program has no age limit, and there's no cost to join. TLABM gives participants a toll-free number so they aren't charged long-distance fees. Children and the "young at heart" are welcome to join the calls each month.

While participants are learning and developing social skills, the program has another obvious benefit: it's fun. Secretary of State Tre Hargett, whose office oversees TLABM and the Library and Archives, said he hopes Tennessee's program can be a model for other "virtual story times" across the country. "I am constantly inspired by the creativity of the people who make up our department," he said. "They saw an opportunity and created this program to address the specific needs of our patrons. I know this initiative is benefiting the lives of those who call in every month."

For more information about this program, please call 800-342-3308.



Librarian Erin Savage reads a book to listeners on the phone during virtual storytime.

Tabletop Role-Playing

Creating social stories through cooperation

by Jack Ver Mulm

Around the start of 2019, I was asked to run a tabletop role-playing game at the Chattanooga Autism Center. I would be the game master for grade school students who were on the autism spectrum.

I was chosen based on my qualities. First, I am on the autism spectrum, and the idea that I would be a game master for others on the spectrum would be unique. In the long run, I think the fact I was a game master for a different group at the time was more important. It meant I had experience running role-playing games and knew how to cultivate a friendly environment.

For everyone who is unfamiliar with tabletop role-playing games, they are social games that use dice and words to create a story. Unlike traditional board games, the only limits for a role-playing game are rules and creativity. Players create characters that they role-play, decide actions for and roll dice to see how successful those actions were. The game master does everything else: set up the story, describe how the players' actions affect the story, and clear up any rules or disagreements. Finally, there is no true winner to a tabletop role-playing game. Victory is shared with everyone.

Running the tabletop sessions was a blast. The players and I made a setting where they played a special military unit fighting terrorists who despised dinosaurs. I gave them broad creativity on how they could resolve the plot. They ended up tossing a dinosaur into a volcano,

blowing up a secret government facility, and summoning a genie. These moments were only possible with my players and I working to "write" the story together.

If the players are having fun, then I am doing my job correctly. But even beyond that, it helps to have a place or group of people whom you can have fun with. From my own experiences in college and grade school, fun is something to be treasured, especially if you can share that fun with people you care about. I always want to provide that space for my players.

For context, I was diagnosed with autism at a young age. Some people think being diagnosed early is better than later, but I would disagree. Both come with their own problems. Mine was growing up believing I was inferior to my peers. But the real kicker is how long you go on believing that; those feelings don't just vanish once you learn the truth. I spent many days working and studying over building lasting connections with anyone. At the time, I thought my self-worth was entirely dependent on the work I could do. Challenging those beliefs is an ongoing struggle. Even

after I graduated magna cum laude from college, saying the word "autism" out loud is difficult.

So, I believe that the best quality about tabletop role-playing games is the cooperation. No single player has all the solutions. A character may be amazing at one



Article author, Jack Ver Mulm

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Tennessee Talks

Partnering with public schools to support students with complex communication needs

by Jolene Sharp, Chief Public Information Officer, Council on Developmental Disabilities

From the Tennessee Talks Flyer: Every child has the right to express their thoughts and ideas, engage socially, and participate meaningfully in their schools and communities, regardless of whether or not they use oral speech. In fact, given the opportunity and teaching, many children can become successful users of alternative and augmentative communication (AAC).

Tennessee Talks is a project funded by the Tennessee Department of Education. This grant allows regional providers across the state to partner with public schools to support students with complex communication needs. The support is provided at no cost to schools or families.

School staff can often struggle to help students with complex communication needs, because they don't have access to training on assistive technology. A speech-language pathologist could be working with a student but not know of devices or other technology that could help that child communicate.

That's where Tennessee Talks comes in. Staff from the regional contractors (listed at the bottom of this article) can help school staff assess the needs of individual students and match those students to communication systems that will be the best fit. Tennessee Talks staff will be there for the whole process, helping to order the devices and training school staff, students, and parents on how to use them. All these services are offered for free.

"With the Tennessee Talks project, we have an incredible opportunity to meet with educational teams, work directly with them to identify their student's communication difficulties, and initiate a structured plan of action to address those needs," said Janice Reese, Direc-

tor of Assistive Technology for Little Tennessee Valley Educational Cooperative, and the Tennessee Talks Coordinator for the Upper and Mid-Cumberland regions. "School staff have been particularly excited about the [communication technology] lending libraries."

According to Reese, the regional library offers a wide range of high- and low-tech communication devices for schools to try, along with a range of adaptive resources to help both the student and staff learn how to best use the device for learning. "Implementation is a critical piece of the process, and we have found many staff unsure of how to...use AAC systems within the classroom," she said.

To help staff use new devices, Reese and her team have developed "Bags of Language/Learning Tasks." The bags can be borrowed to use during a trial period or once a new communication system is in place. Inside are custom items for the device, like books, games, and activities using the device, along with printed communication boards, how-to guides, sheets for tracking data about how the system is working, and other important tools.

Tennessee Talks can help schools in more ways, by:

- Identifying needed access supports (switches, mounts, other ways to help the child use a technology system)
- Providing device programming support
- Troubleshooting problems with current equipment or practices

Tennessee Talks can also be very helpful for schools in rural areas. "In rural Johnson County, we lack resources that are available in larger towns," said Paula Norton,

Special Education Director for Johnson County schools. "With each referral from Johnson County, [Tennessee Talks Regional Coordinator] Molly Ricks made her way to Johnson County...to individually evaluate students with communication needs. In every case, Molly's reports and recommendations effectively addressed the child's needs."

Beyond support for individual students, Tennessee Talks will help students, school staff, and parents form learning communities. These communities will increase access to information and grow expertise about AAC. This will create long-term expertise for schools and families to meet the needs of students with complex communication needs.

Parents who think their child could benefit from Tennessee Talks support should contact their child's school to ask about the program. Educators who are interested in bringing Tennessee Talks to their school should contact the appropriate region below.

Tennessee Talks Regional Support Contacts

Northwest and Southwest

University of Memphis

Vicki Haddix – vhaddix@memphis.edu

Carol Wright – cbwright3@memphis.edu

Mid Cumberland and Upper Cumberland

Little Tennessee Valley Educational Cooperative, Inc.

Janice Reese – at.center@ltvec.org

South Central and Southeast

Signal Centers, Inc.

Beth Warren – beth_warren@signalcenters.org

East Tennessee and First Tennessee

SPARK

Stanley Taylor – staylor@sparktn.org

Molly Ricks – mollyr@sparktn.org

Toward Closing the Disability Voting Gap

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However, the way they register, and the reasons that some don't register, are very different. The study found that people with disabilities make a special trip to a voter registration office to make sure that they have the opportunity to vote, in contrast to many voters without disabilities who register at the DMV when they get their license. We hope that these new tools will help close registration gaps by providing increased voter registration opportunities for people with disabilities in their own communities.

Disability Rights Tennessee is dedicated to ensuring that voters with disabilities have access to vote in Tennessee and are committed to responding to the changing needs of voters. If you have experienced an issue while voting in Tennessee, please contact us at 1-800-342-1660.

Tabletop Role-Playing... Continued from page 15

task and terrible at another. It is truly a team effort to play. The game master, even if his or her task is different from the players, still gets to enjoy their successes and quirky antics. When the cooperation is done well, everyone has a place in the game.

I probably would have benefitted from a program like this when I was younger. But I think it would also benefit individuals on the spectrum to try and find other role-players outside of their autism support group, which can sometimes be difficult. However, finding the right group would be useful for developing better social skills and awareness. Just speaking from personal experience, I have learned cues and signs for knowing good times to chime in, or when to wait for a turn in a conversation.

While I advocate for tabletop role-playing games, my point to all of this is to have fun with the people you care about. Whether or not that comes from role-playing games or another activity is irrelevant. It should bring you joy.

Jack Ver Mulm is a University of TN, Chattanooga graduate who is on the autism spectrum. He aspires to become a journalist and be an advocate for others on the spectrum.

UHC Pathways

A paid internship program for students with disabilities

by **Melanie Lamb, Director of Member Advocacy, UnitedHealthcare Community Plan of Tennessee**

Nationwide, individuals with disabilities experience many challenges associated with participation in the labor force, and are far less likely to have jobs than those without a disability. According to 2018 statistics from the U.S. Department of Labor, the unemployment rate for persons with a disability ages 16 and over was 7.9%, more than twice the rate (3.7%) of those with no disability.

“At UnitedHealthcare Community (UHC) Plan of Tennessee, we see these challenges first-hand through our members in the Employment and Community First CHOICES (ECF CHOICES) program,” said Tonya Copeland, Vice President of Intellectual and/or Developmental Disabilities Services (I/DD). “The ECF CHOICES program promotes and supports integrated, competitive employment and independent living for people who have I/DD.”

To address these challenges, UnitedHealthcare Community Plan wanted to create a collaborative learning opportunity where high school students with I/DD are compensated while building job skills that lead to competitive employment upon graduation.

Preparing youth for adulthood

In collaboration with the Williamson County Board of Education’s High School Transition Program, UnitedHealthcare Community Plan of Tennessee launched UHC Pathways, the state’s first paid internship program for students with I/DD.

Like a traditional student internship, UHC Pathways allows youth with I/DD to be paid for work that prepares them for the transition to employment in an office-based setting after high school.

With frequent communication between business, school system, and job center representatives, the program also encourages strong collaboration between organizations to ensure a successful and positive experience for the intern.

The pilot program

A pilot program launched on March 25, 2019, with two interns from Brentwood High School hired to work with the Case Management Associates (CMA) team on a variety of customized work assignments.

In the weeks leading up to their start date, the interns participated in pre-employment assessments and screenings, the application process, interviews, and orientation meetings. UHC Plan of Tennessee employees and intern mentors also attended trainings to help prepare them for intern goal setting, problem solving, disability etiquette, and inclusion in the workplace.

To encourage successful integration and provide guidance, each intern was assigned to a CMA mentor who helped them strengthen their professional skills for future employment opportunities.



Keith Payet, President and CEO, UnitedHealthcare Community Plan of Tennessee, with spring interns, Fernanda Aguilar and Jack Steinkamp

Building skills and experience

During their time at UHC, the interns gained valuable work experience through a variety of different assignments. They worked on things like analyzing Person-Centered Support Plans, supporting provider networks, and assisting members over the phone. They were also able to improve their professional communication skills by attending department meetings, sending emails, and navigating the different communication platforms.

“The program’s success has exceeded our expectations,” said John Camperlino, Statewide Employment Manager at UHC of Tennessee. “The interns experienced a tremendous amount of growth and the collaboration between all parties involved has established a firm foundation for future program enhancements.”

The internship graduation celebration for the first set of UHC Pathways interns took place on May 17, 2019. The eight-week internship concluded with an exit interview when the interns were able to reflect on their experiences and provide feedback. They also used this time to update their résumés for future job applications.

“It is rare for people with special needs, like me, to find opportunities like this,” said Fernanda Aguilar, UHC Pathways intern. “This internship has proven that I am capable of conquering new skills. I feel accomplished after these two months and am very proud of how far I have come from when I first started.”

Another UHC Pathways intern, Jack Steinkamp, said, “I really feel like I’ve grown as a human being. I have gained

skills in written and verbal communication, problem solving, and email management. All of these assets I have gained will help me to be successful as an independent adult and employee.”

With the success of the pilot program, UHC is looking forward to expanding this internship model to other departments across the organization, lengthening the duration of the program, and hosting multiple sessions each year in different areas across the state of Tennessee. “That way,” Camperlino said, “more high school students with intellectual and developmental disabilities will have the chance to complete a paid internship where they gain valuable skills to help them achieve their employment goals.”

Project SEARCH internship program

Blue Cross Blue Shield has a Project SEARCH internship program in Chattanooga, as does Amerigroup in Nashville. Together with the paid United Healthcare Pathways program, all three Employment and Community First CHOICES managed care organizations (MCOs) offer internships for young adults with developmental disabilities. Many of these interns go on to permanent jobs. Tennessee can be proud that our MCOs are practicing what they preach. These MCOs manage home- and community-based services – including help with employment – for people with disabilities under TennCare’s Employment and Community First CHOICES program. They also live out that mission in their own businesses through these internships.

Breaking Ground Call for Artwork



We’re looking for art by & about Tennesseans with disabilities and their families to feature in our arts magazine. Submission deadline is Oct.15

Send to Ned Andrew Solomon at ned.solomon@tn.gov

Questions? Call 615.532.6556

Tennessee Council on Developmental Disabilities

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