I thought a lot about what I wanted out of going to college, as this was going to be a major transition from what I was used to. I knew the big part was education and that I’d be living in a community with people. As a result, I first attended a small liberal arts college in Asheville known as Warren Wilson College. I initially thought a small college would be best for me, as it seemed from the onset that classes with 8 to 12 students would be a better fit for me. At Warren Wilson they use the Triad System. All students attend classes, work on campus and volunteer. I had no work experience and I did a lot of volunteering in high school.

My parents and I made a trip to Asheville during spring break of my senior year to view the campus and talk with the people in the Disability Office. I mentioned the accommodations I would need to succeed, a note taker, extra time to complete exams and possibly a support group. I was told that all of these were available. I remember on the ride home to Atlanta we were all happy. My mother loved the area and talked about coming up for regular visits.

Warren Wilson did not turn out to be the right school for me. First of all, for various reasons, they did not come up with any of the accommodations that they agreed to. Secondly, and probably more important, I felt I never fit in. I never developed any real friendships. After finishing studying there was nothing to do. There was no gym. There were no clubs. I was bored. I was lonely.

From Warren Wilson, I went to Georgia Tech—a school of over 30,000 students that proved to be more useful to my endeavors. They had the supports I requested, and others that I had never even thought of. I felt that they really did have an understanding of what a student with ASD needed. Either I had my own room, or I was in an apartment with an RA who was in charge of the whole building. This meant I didn’t have to worry about a roommate who had parties into the night, music blasting, etc. I also was able to participate in a weekly Asperger’s Support Meeting. It was led by a psychiatrist at the Stamps Health Center. We talked about whatever was on our minds, challenges we were facing, good stuff we wanted to share. In addition to those accommodations, I had a note taker in each class, double time for testing in a quiet room, the ability to turn in assignments late (I did this twice). An important accommodation was allowing me to bring a class assistant (GVRA calls them a PSA- Personal Social Adjustment Trainer- sort of like a parapro, but better).

Those were just the accommodations. One of the best things about Georgia Tech was that it was big. There are over 435 clubs. I got involved. I attended the Pakistani Friendship Club for a bunch of times. They were all students away from home. What I liked about it most was the food that they had at every meeting. I also learned to Swing Dance. They met twice a month. It was a great way to party on Friday nights. I am 6ft 4 inches, but I never played basketball – that is until I went to Georgia Tech. I would go to “pick up” games in the Rec Center almost every night. Last, but not least, I am a Pokemon Go fanatic. I initially played it walking around by myself. Then I discovered at Georgia Tech a group that gets together to play it. I have joined the group. I feel that I belong. Being at Georgia Tech feels like being a part of a community. I return to Georgia Tech in August to begin my Master’s Degree in City and Regional Planning.

Zachary W. Starbuck

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