

Zachary Starbuck: From Fans, Rapid Transit to Graduate School

Zack is achieving his goals in life through a combination of hard work, self-knowledge and self-advocacy. He started on this path by being clear about what he wanted and what it would take for him to get what he wanted and needed. He is a model for any disabled child who is on the verge of making life decisions for her or himself.

Zachary's mom Kimberly, a Parent Partner for Parent to Parent of Georgia, knew shortly after he was born that Zack had special needs. She had him evaluated at the age of 2-1/2, at which time the experts first gave him the diagnosis of speech delayed. She enrolled him in the Small Voices Program in Berkeley, California, a small intensive speech therapy program. At 4, he was diagnosed with Pervasive Developmental Disorder Not Otherwise Specified. When Zachary was 6, he received a diagnosis of Asperger's Syndrome. Zachary's dad, John, agreed with these choices, but also had his own way of meeting Zack's special needs. He would spend hours per day walking with Zachary through the business district of Petaluma, where they first lived, and then Oakland and Berkeley, searching for things of interest to Zack. At first it was fans.... Zack loved to turn them on and off, and to feel the breeze on his face. John let Zack choose which fans and for how long. Once it was too much for one of the local hardware stores, which kicked them out for creating a "g-d d----d wind tunnel!" Zack was unfazed.

During one of their outings, John and Zack got on the Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) rail line in Berkeley and traveled in search of fans. It soon became clear that Zack was much more interested in municipal light rail and bus transportation than he was in fans. (He maintained his interest in fans for several years, just not as obsessively as he had done previously.) Zack and John traveled the length and breadth of the BART lines every weekend that they had the chance. They would also take connector service on California Transit, or CalTrans, and all of the bus lines including San Francisco Municipal Transit, or MUNI, Alameda-Contra Costa Transit, or AC Transit, and other lines. Zack would easily memorize the routes, how they connected, and when they ran.

Even when Zack was more absorbed in fans than in rail and bus lines, he was also committing to memory the street layout for the East Bay stretching from Fremont to Richmond and beyond. He was more reliable than any GPS. His older sister Meleia, who ultimately attended an Ivy League college, had no sense of direction whatsoever, so she would put her little brother in the back of the car and ask him to give her turning directions to her destination. Zack was more than happy to do so, as it was his excuse for spending hours with Meleia.

We came to the conclusion that Zack was inerrant when it came to directions. Then one day we asked him for directions to a street we had never heard of, Juanita Way in Berkeley. He said he did not know. We were shocked.... But then Kimberly asked him, "How do you spell 'Juanita Way'?" He said, "W-A-N-E-T-A W-A-Y." When we explained it was a Spanish word and told him how to spell it, he instantly gave us the correct directions.

Zachary's success has been built upon this model of encouraging him to set his own goals and aspirations, and then putting into place the supports that would help him achieve what he wanted. When it came time for him to first create a Transition Plan, including an ultimate goal for a

profession, he sat down with his Case Manager, and NOT his parents, to think and talk it out. At that first Transition IEP while he was in the 6th grade, he had chosen as his career goal becoming an Urban Planner specializing in transportation issues.

Not every child is going to be so clear as to such ultimate goals. In subsequent Transition Plans, Zack added goals such as to be a Criminologist, a Computer Technician, and a US Senator, to name but a few. But by encouraging Zack to follow through on his self-set goals, it made the creation of his array of supports and accommodations more easy to accomplish, and made the task of arguing for same more logical. Zack's challenges with Speech, Writing, and Math problems all were things that an Urban Planner would have to overcome in order to become successful in that line of work.

Zachary applied to 12 colleges and universities, and got accepted by 11. He chose, based in part on the supports that he would get from Georgia Vocational Rehabilitation Agency, and ended up at Georgia Institute of Technology. His parents sent copies of his admission letters to the psychologist who had stated that Zack, who was four years old at the time, would not graduate with a regular diploma from high school, would never attend college, and would be lucky to get and keep a job bagging groceries. Zack and his parents learned early on to seek out the help and counsel of only those who will support Zack in achieving his goals. Georgia Tech has proven itself superior in providing disability supports for Aspergers students, including note-taking, group meetings, and other services.

GVRA has proven to be instrumental to Zachary's post-secondary educational success. GVRA has provided funding for tutors in the area of writing, math/science, and socialization. It also has funded the services of a Personal Social Adjustment or PSA trainer, who has shadowed Zack through most of his classes and has provided critical and timely advice as to proper and functional behavior during most of the academic day. Zack and his parents secured the services of the PSA trainer, who had been Zachary's paraprofessional aide beginning in the 5th grade. GVRA also has funded the services of an Occupational Therapist, who has given him invaluable training and advice for fitness and sensory processing needs. Finally, GVRA's team approach and meetings have given shape and definition to Zachary's overall program.

Zachary is returning to Georgia Tech this fall to enroll in its Masters in City and Regional Planning program, with the support of GVRA and the ADAPTS Disability supports that he will continue to get from the University. It all began with a 2 year old sitting on his Dad's shoulders turning on fans to his heart's content.