

SPECIAL CONCERNS AUTISTIC STUDENTS GET TRAINING, BUT LIFE AFTER GRADUATION MURKY

*Jamie Malernee Education Writer. South Florida Sun - Sentinel. Fort Lauderdale, Fla.:
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When Noah Allen allows himself to dream, he dreams of music.

He'd play the guitar in a rock band. The crowd would roar, and the notes would soar through his fingers and body.

Noah, 20 years old and born with a moderate case of autism, smiles when he talks about music. Then he shakes his head, as if to wake up to the truth: He has two more years before he must leave public school and the special services it offers disabled students.

He is training now so that maybe when he graduates he can hold a job. He works three hours a day in the cafeteria at Atlantic Technical Center, wiping tables, refilling ketchup bins, and throwing "yucky things into the trash."

"I really got to work hard," he says, suddenly intense. "The most important thing is the work."

Noah is part of a tidal wave of autistic students about to leave the public school system who get some of the help they need and who, with follow-through services, could be functioning members of society.

But those services will largely evaporate once they finish school.

"A crisis is looming," says Dennis Haas, president of ARC Broward, an organization dedicated to enhancing the lives of people with and without disabilities. "What is going to happen to these students? Are they going to wander the streets? Sit and watch TV all day at home? There is clearly a shortage of options and a large number of students coming out."

In 1994, 256 Broward school students had autism. Today, there are more than 1,300. The increase, says Leah Kelly, head of exceptional student education here, is due to an expanding definition of autism, better diagnosis, and word of mouth that Broward offers some of the best services in the state for autistic students.

The educators at Atlantic Technical Center in Coconut Creek, where Noah attends, help create that reputation. They meet each morning with the teens and practice social and work skills. Then they supervise the young adults at a real-life workplace.

"We want to make sure they leave here with as many job skills as possible," says Gary Grigull, head of PASS, which stands for Program for Autistic Secondary Students, at Atlantic Tech. "We can provide smaller class sizes, job coaches, therapists, things they need. But once they graduate, there's not a lot of support."

Last year, Noah saved \$700 to pay for his own summer camp and a guitar.

"I get paid every couple of weeks. It feels great," he says.

If Noah can't be a rock star he, at least, doesn't want to be a burden.

MOTIVATIONAL TOOL

At the end of the school day, Noah used to go home and practice guitar. Not lately. He can pick up just about any song -- all by ear -- but can't seem to create his own.

"I give up," he says one afternoon, sounding defeated.

Life has been hard on Noah, but he's harder on himself. Noah knows he is different.

"The worst part [of work] is when people pick on me," he says. "I tell them to stop. I tell them to go away."

His teachers aren't sure who Noah thinks is teasing him. It's possible he's misreading people, a common problem for those with autism.

Those diagnosed as on the "autistic spectrum" can range from highly intelligent but socially inept to those with mental retardation and severe behavioral issues. Noah is somewhere in the middle, a fascinating mix of contradictions. His dad says he has a photographic memory and a talent for music, an ability to teach himself any instrument. He began reading at age 4.

Yet he struggles to hold a conversation and is unable to make simple judgment calls. In some ways, he will always be a child. Tell the 20-year-old goodbye, and he's likely to smile and say, "I'll miss you."

But if something tiny goes wrong, you'll see a different side. Details and structure are very important to people with autism, which creates an outlook on the world that is often analogized as "not seeing the forest for the trees."

Take a recent day when, before work, Noah realized his ID was missing.

"My ID! My ID! My ID is lost!" he cried, eyes wide.

"It will be all right," assured his teacher, Amy Salamon.

"It's not OK. My ID is gone. I'm going to faint!" He slumped theatrically in his chair.

Salamon tried to discourage the behavior by ignoring it.

Noah realized he wasn't following the plan they had practiced for when he gets upset. "Noah, why are you making trouble?" he asked himself under his breath, growing more anxious. "You're going to get fired!"

The teacher stood and wrote something on a legal pad. She asked him to read it:

Sometimes things get lost.

[My boss] Chef Christie understands this. I can explain this to Chef Christie.

She will be happy that I let her know.

We can look for it later.

Right now, Chef Christie is concerned about work.

Noah paused. Together, he and Salamon headed out the door toward the cafeteria. A few minutes later, Noah was fine, scrubbing away at tables -- in a specific pattern he always follows -- in his white apron and chef's hat.

UNCERTAIN FUTURE

Noah doesn't think too much about the future, but his father does. Albert Allen, a carpenter who raised Noah and two daughters on his own in Fort Lauderdale, worries what will happen to his son when he's too old to care for him.

"They have homes where these kids can go live and work. But hopefully, there will always be a family member there for him," he says quietly.

The father has more immediate concerns. Like what will happen when Noah graduates. It's taken years to find teachers who understand his son's needs. Allen says Noah is making real progress at Atlantic Technical.

"Out of all the programs, it's been the best. They've really worked to get the kids to be on their own," Allen says.

The father has his own dream: for his son to work in a music store, or maybe a radio station. He says his son's love of music and phenomenal memory would make him ideal for sorting CDs and recalling lyrics.

It's not just about wanting Noah to be able to support himself. Allen knows that may never happen. He doesn't want his son's unique gifts to go to waste.

"Noah," he says, "will be self-sufficient enough to have self-worth."

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[Illustration]

PHOTO; Caption: LUNCH RUSH: Noah Allen, 20, a student in the PASS program at Atlantic Technical Center in Coconut Creek, uses his job in the cafeteria as a form of motivation. "The most important thing is the work," he says. Staff photo/Susan Stocker

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