

First Class Support for College Students on the Autism Spectrum:

*Practical Advice for College Counselors,
Educators, and Parents*

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Learning the hard way

By Tom Griffith-Dyers
The Vidette-Messenger

INDIANAPOLIS — You really can't know a person until you've walked a mile in their shoes — or ridden a week in their wheelchair.

Chesterton native Michael Duggan did just that.

A Butler University senior majoring in psychology and sociology/anthropology, Duggan bound his feet together last winter and took to a wheelchair for seven days, hoping to understand what it's like to be disabled.

His experiment in empathy inspired a campus-wide spin-off — the Butler University Awareness Challenge. For three hours Friday, 10 teams of two people spent 45 minutes each in wheelchairs. Given the time they had to complete, it was an insight into a world many had only read about.

"My basic hope is this event keep this an issue on people's minds and not let it get lost into the background," he said.

"I can read textbook after textbook and get four Ph.D.s, but if you've actually gone and lived a disability, never going to really at it's like."

RISEING STAR



"My biggest concern was not to trivialize what they (the wheelchair-bound) went through, so I talked these things out with them... And the things I learned that week surmounted any class I would have taken."

Michael Duggan, Chesterton, Butler University senior

He did four months of research before undertaking his experiment, getting input from Butler's disabled community.

And he discovered his campus has made great strides in accessibility in many areas, but, like most places and people, there's much yet to do.

"I did this in early winter, and the university hadn't shoveled very well. One night I had to leave my lab pretty late, and my wheels got stuck in the

snow — I couldn't get traction.

"There was no one around, I ended up sitting in the cold for an hour shouting for help."

So what would've been a stroll for an able-bodied person proved an arduous task.

"And by the time I got to the point I was going to, I was so exhausted, I didn't have any energy to do what I wanted."

Even going to the bathroom or taking a shower took on a nightmarish aspect.

"A lot of bathroom stalls weren't big enough for my wheelchair. Then I'd have to wheel around another 10 minutes to find one that was."

There was also trouble for disabled, but you had to have your weight down the chair onto a stall in the shower, and I felt a lot and had to get help."

And help was not always forthcoming, he soon realized.

There are people who are genuinely concerned about those with disabilities, but, sadly, that's the minority.

"Some think the disabled are privileged or lazy and don't want to work and just have the government pay for them. Others feel sorry for you and treat you like a leper — put you on the head and treat you like a dog, or push you around."

"I went to the mall one day, and it took me a half-hour driving around the parking lot because all the disabled spaces were taken. Once inside, people would stare at me, and, in the stores, people would treat me like I was helpless."

"A lot of people were suddenly coming up to me and saying, 'Oh, if you need anything, just give me a call.'"

When Duggan took one of them up on the offer, however,

asking for help getting to the library, he got a different story.

"The response was, 'Oh, I'm sorry to hear that. Maybe later, but they'll be up on the list.'"

His determination to succeed and in the city has been rewarded with a considerable eye for accessibility, and it's not over, Duggan noted.

For instance, "The library has installed a whole system for people with reading disabilities. You put a book under a computer, and it reads out the words, or project it onto a computer screen."

"It's really exciting to see things that show the university's trying to do things."

And his excitement is mine — he plans to spend his career for and helping people with disabilities. He's a graduate degree in psychology.

"Ultimately, I hope my own private practice I can help people find places to live and work with people of various abilities."

"I think a lot of disabilities aren't problems because of service. So if you can learn a





Inside COD

Autismerica is an organization for students on the autism spectrum



Elements of Success

- Having an understanding of ones diagnosis
- Some ability to self-advocate, even if on a very basic level
- Ability to succeed in education for classes that are homework-based or exam-based
- Some type of outside work experience (paid or volunteer)
- A desire to continue with ones education (VERY IMPORTANT)
- Some ability to manage time to do homework successfully and independently
- Minimal involvement of parents in completing homework (if any!)
- An ability to control and monitor the degree of ones gaming and technology use
- A parent (s) with a realistic understanding and expectation of their child's abilities, strengths, and deficits
- A parental openness to continuing to be involved in their children's education (with limits)

A Creed for Parents of a Child on Autism Spectrum

There is no greater job I can do than be the best possible parent to my child. To that that effect I will always work hard to encourage:

Love

Independence

Happiness

Safety

Security

Communication (no matter what level)

Understanding

Intellectual development

Challenge

Growth

Relationships

Skills

Values

Identity

Confidence

And Freedom

A Creed for Parents of a Child on Autism Spectrum (continued)

*I also recognize that to do my part in achieving these goals, I must also take care of myself.
Therefore, I must turn to myself and those I trust to help me develop:*

Love
Independence
Happiness
Safety
Security
Communication (no matter what level)
Understanding
Intellectual development
Challenge
Growth
Relationships
Skills
Values
Identity
Confidence
And Freedom

A Creed for Parents of a Child on Autism Spectrum (conclusion)

I am strong, but I cannot do this job alone. It is okay to ask others for help. It is okay to take care of myself, and it is okay to express my needs to the world. Even the strongest of trees cannot shelter its own roots if it does not seek water to grow. I am human, and I am enough. My love is strong and shall always flourish.

Epilogue: Michael Duggan's Tips for Success in Higher Education and Life

1. Always appreciate
2. Look for gaps in services
3. Seek out opportunities to work outside your department
4. Be the listener, not the talker
5. Never take interruptions when with students unless absolutely necessary

Epilogue: Michael Duggan's Tips for Success in Higher Education and Life (cont.)

6. Never let important ideas be forgotten
7. Students need personal, genuine connections
8. Seek out any and every opportunity to speak in front of others
9. The people on the front lines are usually the hardest working and least appreciated ones out there
10. Students are the best judge if you're doing a good job

Epilogue: Michael Duggan's Tips for Success in Higher Education and Life (cont.)

11. Don't be afraid to bend the rules of buck the system, a little
12. Laugh more, worry less
13. Family and loved ones first
14. Don't take everything too seriously and calm the @\$(*&#\$ down!!!
15. If you don't love it, quit. Please!!!!

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