

#DisabilityAdvocacyDaySC

March 1, 2023



What some of our speakers had to say...

Today I challenge you to meet as many people as you can very different from you! Today I challenge you to truly learn about the disability community and what this community has to offer the world. Today I challenge you to put yourself in another person's shoes. How would you feel if you were unable to work because others believed you aren't capable based on many stereotypes? What if your child was excluded from different activities simply because of their disability? The thought of this should break you and that is what I want you to think about when it comes to the disability community. I know people that use wheelchairs that are the most brilliant people I have ever met. I have met people living with anxiety, depression or some other mental illness and these people are world changers. Today I challenge you to view the world a little differently. Today I challenge you to make changes, whether you are a lawmaker, business owner, educator or any kind of professional so ALL people are included in ALL environments. You can do this by changing your employment application process to make it more inclusive. Broaden your interview process. Because a person may have limited speech or none at all does not mean that they cannot be major contributors to our society (cough cough Stephen Hawking). There is constant talk about change but that seems to be all it ever is...just talk. Well, I am challenging EVERYONE here today to be a part of the change. If we want true equality and equity, we need to start making these changes so use your voices and let them really be heard. EVERYONE DESERVES THE SAME!!!! EVERYONE! ~ Diane Owens, Project SEARCH Statewide Coordinator

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I am here today to talk about mental health, responses to student behavior, and the impact of these responses on instruction for students with disabilities. According to a report prepared by civil rights organizations using data from the 2015-2016 school year, students around the U.S. missed over 11 million days of instruction due to out-of-school suspensions. Reports have also showed a large gap between students with disabilities and their nondisabled peers. In the 2017-2018 school year, the days of lost instruction per 100 nondisabled students was 19 days while the days of lost instruction per 100 students with individualized education program (IEPs) was 41 days. In other words, students with disabilities missed twice as many days of instruction due to suspension when compared to their nondisabled peers. Further, Students with IEPs are about 12% of the overall student population but account for more than 20% of the suspensions. This discrepancy, and the high rate of suspension, is present in South Carolina. In fact, we have seen some school years where 25% of students with IEPs in the State are suspended. And these numbers don't include in-school suspension or informal removals. Recently, an article in the New York Times chronicled difficulties parents of students with disabilities were experiencing because of informal removals, which often took the form of phone calls from the school requesting that parents come pick up their student and take the student home for the remainder of the day. While these types of removals are not recorded in student discipline data systems, they can significantly impede a student's access to instruction.

Restraint and seclusion are other responses to student behavior that can cause significant harm to student learning. As with suspensions, we have seen that restraint and seclusion are used more frequently with students with disabilities. We have also seen that the effects of restraint and seclusion can be significant, particularly if appropriate practices are not followed. In 2012, the South Carolina Department of Education, in collaboration with disability advocacy groups, and university and school district personnel, adopted Guidelines on the Use of Seclusion and Restraint (Guidelines). While, these Guidelines likely reduced the use of seclusion and restraint in South Carolina schools, we do not have systemic data to confirm the gains and anecdotal data suggests that there is still work to be done.

So, where should we go from here? As a State we need to increase the investment in school-based mental health services with the goal of keeping children in school and receiving instruction. This would include more mental health positions in schools and more efforts to recruit and retain qualified school mental health professionals. We also need to continue to explore positive, proactive approaches to supporting children with disabilities consistent with the discipline-behavior guidance recently released by the US Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP). Additional training and dissemination of information to all stakeholders will be critical to improving behavior practices in schools.

With respect to restraint and seclusion, it is time to revisit the Guidelines and look to see if there are ways to increase the depth and scope of its impact. For example, we may be able to use the Guidelines as framework for regulations or legislation to help ensure that appropriate practices are being used in schools and to provide for better transparency and reporting practices. We may also look to creating a State-wide reporting system so that data can be reviewed and analyzed to inform our work in this area. ~ Peter Keup, Director of the SC Dept. of Education Office of Special Education Services

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Every young high schooler dreams of one day attending college or university, but for some, like myself it's the hardest dream to have.

*The dream was **I WANTED TO GO TO COLLEGE!***

I wanted to go to college - not just for the social life, but to expand my horizon in the fashion industry and later on disability rights. Suddenly, the fears of being unwanted or bullying comes back into my mind. I was scared that I wasn't going to find what I truly wanted. Then came the ugly truth... was I really going to let my disability get me down or let it get the best of me? Or was I going to push past all the ugly, negative, and bad stuff? You bet I sure did; I just had to prove them wrong and show them that I could go to university. From that moment on, I started researching programs and summer classes I could take. I started talking/sharing and showing my ideas to my guidance counselor and my IEP team. Sure enough, my research led me to find a website, a great website indeed. That website is called ThinkCollege.net, designed for people, like myself, with disabilities and autism, who are thinking about continuing on with their education in the college and university level/settings.

Thanks to ThinkCollege.net, I found CarolinaLIFE and Blossomed.

While attending at USC and CarolinaLIFE program, I took college courses in the study of fashion, social media, management, sports management, and like I said before my own study in disability rights.

What was really appealing to me when I got into CarolinaLIFE, was that they allowed me to achieve my goals and dreams that I had to set for myself; they even helped encouraged me to set new goals and dreams to break through.

My time and experience at CL and USC were really what I would call wall breaking.

I got to work with numerous staff and faculty members who helped and encouraged me to get involved with organizations, such as my sorority Gamma Phi Beta; where I assisted with my exec board in planning events, a listening ear, or just a helpful hand in any task that needed to be done.

Some big accomplishments that I currently hold are being the first CL student to rush and be initiated into a sorority. Another accomplishment that I have achieved was being the first CL student to be election/voted into my student government as a secretary and senator.

All the while achieving and accomplishing these goals and dreams, I learned that achieving one's goals isn't as easy as I thought it would be. What I learned was, you needed to break each goal down and come up with an action plan.

The outcome for me was to leave CL and get a job in retailing and move throughout the levels but all that changed thanks to one of my very dear friends who I met and helped in student government who reminded me what I truly wanted to do, Advocacy. What I'm doing now, two years later, is advocating for something that I truly believe will make a big difference for all young adults with intellectual disabilities.

*In conclusion, you are looking at a full-time employee of the university of South Carolina; with fully competitive benefits, and an inspiring job that I absolutely love waking up to knowing that each day I'm trying to pave the way for future and present CL students. Years ago, I never dreamed of doing all the things that I did and am doing. I hope future young adults get the same opportunities as I did. ~ **Ruth Bollinger, Lead Coach at CarolinaLIFE at USC***

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As a person who doesn't drive, I continue to think about travel a lot here in the Central Midlands. I have often thought and said, "Transit is an immediate need, that often, cannot be met immediately." Any form of getting from one place to another requires some form of planning ahead. If I were a driver, I would pull out my smart phone app, GPS, or map and start planning where I am going. I would consider how much it cost for me to get there, in gas and time. I would think about the best route then...I could plan to leave my house at a certain time, grab my keys, walk out the door and go. But... I am not a driver.

So, if my smart phone app, GPS, or map are accessible, or I am able to use the inaccessible version, I can start planning my trip. If I live in an area where there is public transportation, which I do, and I know how to use it, which I do, I can ride that. Let's see, the shortest distance to my workplace is about 2.8 miles from my house. That's 8 to 10 minutes via car, 30 to 40 minutes via bus. Using one bus route, I only have to walk half a mile down a busy road without sidewalks. I better be careful not to fall. Using two bus routes, I have to be at the bus stop by around 7:30 am and get to my office by around 8:30 am. "My workplace does not open until 9am."

It's too bad my adult tricycle doesn't have bike lanes for me to safely ride it to work. Google maps estimates that would only be 17 minutes. At least I can use the buses that follow a fixed route if I am careful not to fall walking to or from a bus stop. Grass, gravel, broken pavement, whole pavement, parking lots, and any other debris on the side of the road are, most of the time, my sidewalk.

But then I think, "It's not so bad. At least I do not have to have an accessible vehicle to complete my trip like some of the friends, coworkers, or consumers I have who face ride services telling them they don't have accessible vehicles, don't have enough vehicles or people to take them in a timely manner, and don't want to have to pay for those vehicles."

So, then I ask myself again...

Why is there a shortage of sidewalks, let alone accessible sidewalks, crosswalks, bicycle lanes, bus lanes, shelters, and benches? There are 27 public transportation agencies in the state of South Carolina. So why is there not a ride for every person who needs to go to work, school, the doctor, or just out to have fun? I think about all the reasons pedestrians, cyclists, bus riders... people like me have been told that they have no place or way to travel. Money and the lack of planning are the most popular reasons that come to mind.

While the Palmetto Cycling Coalition with South Carolina Livable Communities did an amazing job of advocating for Complete Streets with the South Carolina Department of Transportation, the streets are not complete...yet.

While there are plans for bus rapid transit in the low country, there are none for the other parts of the state that could use it...yet.

While there may be more South Carolinians who know about their alternative transportation options, including public transit, than there were before, the information is not offered alongside driver's education...yet. While there are ways we can improve rural transportation, those improvements haven't been made... yet.

Today, we are asking our legislators to invest in our causes. Remembering the people who don't drive for the purposes of getting them to school, work, the doctor's or wherever they like doesn't have enough investment...yet. ~ Brittany Terry, The Comet Mobility Management Specialist with Able SC

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My name is Tanner Smith and I am 24 years old. I am a young adult who has Autism, and I am also a graduate of Clemson University in the ClemsonLIFE program. I live independently in Clemson, South Carolina with two roommates and I have a full-time job. I have lots of friends, I go on many social outings, I go to church...I have a very full and happy life. I want to tell everyone that anything is possible for people who have Autism, and that Autism is not a bad thing...it just makes life a little different than most people's and also very interesting.

I was diagnosed with Autism and Sensory Integration Dysfunction when I was 4 years old. Being around other kids was hard for me and it was hard for me to learn in school. I was in my own world a lot. Noises and crowds bothered me when I was little. I did something called "stimming" to cope with the world around me. That means I made up a lot of sounds and moved my body in certain ways that made me feel calmer. I did not like being away from my parents or familiar people.

I had a lot of different therapies to help me learn while I was going up. I did ABA therapy, special diets, light therapy, floor time, and many others. I went to several different schools to see where I could learn best and finally ended up at Glenforest School in Columbia. At Glenforest, the teachers worked very hard with me and really believed in me, especially Dr. Susan Thomas, who was the headmaster and my teacher. By the time I was 15, I was really learning to control my "stims" and have longer conversations with people. I had the chance to run cross country and play golf in high school. These activities helped me learn and grow a lot.

After graduating high school in 2017, my parents and I decided it would be a great idea for me to get some part-time jobs and learn more responsibilities at home. Cornerstone Café at Cornerstone Church and Chick-Fil-a of Orangeburg both believed I could be a good worker and were kind enough to give me a chance to work. I loved my jobs at both those places and learned so much and made a lot of friends. I learned how to ask questions if I was confused, how to stay on task, how to be responsible, and how to interact with co-workers.

I was lucky enough to be accepted into the ClemsonLIFE program for the fall of 2018. I had never lived away from home before, so it was kind of scary. LIFE students live on campus with an Independent Living Assistance and roommates, and we are fully part of campus life. I learned how to cook, keep my apartment clean, use Uber, navigate around Clemson by myself, go to job interviews, use a debit card, and how to be a good roommate.

Being a ClemsonLIFE student completely changed my life and I believe that I can live independently. It gave me so much confidence and knowledge for the future. I do not think I could have done this if I had not had the opportunity to go to college.

After graduating from Clemson in 2022, I got a job at The Shephard Hotel in Clemson. They employ a large number of people with disabilities.

*The main thing I want people to know is that Autism is not a bad thing. People with disabilities can go to college, they can make friends, they like to have fun, and they are good workers. There are so many cool things I would never have done and so many cool people I would never have met if I didn't have Autism. I love my life and I am happy to get to tell my story! ~ **Tanner Smith, ClemsonLIFE graduate***