

AUGUST 2013

By Courtney Vinson

For many special education students, the dream of going away to college (even after so many school years of hard work and dedication) is just that—a dream. The harsh reality for many special education students and their families is that because we have learning differences and many challenges, there are few options out there with regard to education post-high school.

Families with “regular education” students often take for granted that they will go away to college after high school. That is just the normal course of events. Until recently, a lot of special education students were denied the opportunity of going away to college where they can learn about living on their own and explore what they are interested in for the future. When I was in high school, I vividly remember sitting in several IEP meetings with my parents, listening to teachers talk about my limited options for the future. They kept telling us that without a diploma, college was not really an option for me.

Late in my senior year of high school, I began talking with my parents about joining the Pathway program at UCLA. Suddenly it felt like new doors were about to open for me. I knew immediately after visiting and touring Pathway that this was somewhere I wanted to be. Pathway is a unique college setting for students like me, who can flourish and learn to be the best they can be. When I visited, I got to see many students like me who were living away from home, learning to be independent, taking college classes, and enjoying the entire college experience.

Shortly after my high school graduation, I received my letter of acceptance to Pathway. That was one

of the happiest days of my life! When I left home to attend the program two years ago, I had no idea of how life-changing my experience would be.

I have learned so many things, just like an average college student. One of

my biggest challenges in the beginning was learning how to get along with my four suitemates. That experience taught me how to live with people other than my family.

One of my favorite aspects of my college experience was the meal plan in the dining halls of UCLA. We got to eat with all the regular students and it was a great social experience. The food was awesome, too! Every Friday night, after we saved our extra “meal swipes” on our card, we would all get together and go to “late night” for pizza and other goodies. We also got to cook in our apartments, which was actually lots of fun, planning and making meals with several students.

While at UCLA, in addition to taking Pathway courses, I also took some recreational classes with regular students. My favorites were Watercolor Painting and Pastel Drawing.



Courtney Vinson

Some of my most wonderful memories come from the amazing internships that I was able to participate in. After the first year, I took a summer internship close to my home at a camp/art farm located in a country setting in Carlsbad with farm animals. I was an aide to the camp counselors and helped the children with their art projects. It was lots of fun.

My other internship was very special, and I will remember it for the rest of my life. In my second year, I took the bus three days a week to Santa Monica to intern at State Senator Fran Pavley's office. It was an exciting job and her staff was kind and great to work with.

I learned so much about working in an office and holding a job.

I feel so lucky and grateful to my parents and to Pathway for helping make my dreams come true. I know my parents have worked very hard and made

many sacrifices in order to send me to college. I graduated knowing that I had a college education with a certificate. I also made many lifelong friendships, received job training, and learned how to live independently. But most importantly, I left with a strong sense of confidence knowing that I could accomplish just about anything.

“My junior high school teacher once told me to reach for the stars in life and said I could accomplish anything I put my mind to. Now, I really do believe this!”

After I returned home, I got a job at a luxury resort hotel in my hometown. I work up to 32 hours a week in the golf department. I have just started receiving my own health benefits and I am very proud of that. I am currently saving up for my own

apartment where I can live independently.

My junior high school teacher once told me to reach for the stars in life and said I could accomplish anything I put my mind to. Now, I really do believe this!

This article is reprinted with permission from the National Gateway to Self-Determination “Research to Practice in Self-Determination Series,” Issue 6: The Impact of College on Self-Determination. The National Gateway to Self-Determination, a National Training Initiative on Self-Determination, is funded by the Administration on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities. The entire “Research to Practice in Self-Determination” Series can be found at www.ngsd.org/everyone/research-practice-self-determination-issues.