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TOP STORY

# Life, job skills open doors for those with special needs

By Sara Samora | The Herald-Zeitung Sep 22, 2019

Alex Aseltine gives a customer a high five Thursday while bagging groceries at the H-E-B on Old Seguin Road. Aseltine has his own YouTube channel called autism speaks. "I love telling jokes at work. I try and make people's days," he said.

Mikala Compton

New Braunfels resident Brenda MacGillis is thrilled that her daughter, Lauren Loudon, 20, is doing her own laundry.

It's a skill she learned at New Braunfels Independent School District's center, the Gateway Transition Program.

The program is for 18 to 22 year olds who have finished their high school curriculum and are now learning job as well as basic daily living skills.

In the past, NBISD and Comal ISD had partnered together for transitioning service. Each school district brought their own resources and combined them to make a bigger and better program for the young adults who had completed their curriculum.

However, both school districts outgrew the shared program, with NBISD's special education population increasing over 900 students.

## **Shy at first**

MacGillis said this is Loudon's third year in the transitioning program, with the first two at Comal.

"What I'm really happy about is moving her back to her district," MacGillis said. "I feel like she has the opportunity be with her peer group a little closer to home and you see the skills building. It's sometimes gradual and sometimes all of a sudden you see it like a huge leap."

It's keeping consistent with what kind of accommodations would be necessary and then having her practice those skills until she's mastered them or comes as close to mastering them as possible.

"She can seem kind of shy," MacGillis said. "She doesn't communicate verbally until you get to know her."

She thinks those are good and important things they will see improve.

"They're all at different levels so we work on a little bit of each of those depending on their individual goals that we've been looking at," said Kay Blanchard, teacher at NBISD's Gateway Transition Program.

The Gateway classroom is set a little like a one-room studio apartment. As soon as someone enters, there is a white board and desks.

One desk had an issue of the *Herald-Zeitung*, which Blanchard said they all read and talk about the latest issues in class.

There are some shelves stocked with food items like cans and boxes of cereal. This is where they learn how to shop.

Next to that, is a bed, which they learn how to make

Across the room is the kitchen and a washer and dryer. These are the skills students master to become independent.

Loudon has been doing a lot of laundry this past week. Even at home.

Blanchard tells MacGillis how Loudon got up to retrieve the laundry when the buzzer went off, without anyone asking her to do it.

"I was very excited about that," Blanchard said.

Then she was ready to start another load immediately.

"She was like, 'Okay let's start,'" Blanchard said. "So, she's grown leaps and bounds just in three weeks that she's been here."

### **Home skills are job skills**

Behind the desks is a rack of bright, colorful T-shirts. It's the retail section of the room. There they can sort them by color or size.

Soon, the Gateway Transitioning Center will have a print shop in the room.

“It's where we're starting at baby steps but we're pretty close to opening it up,” Blanchard said. “And we'll be able to offer a laminating poster, making copies, shredding, all types of jobs and that'll be the actual training ground for the students.”

They also go to job sites, like Habitat for Humanity's ReStore, where two former graduates of the transitioning program now work.

“You notice all of our students are different,” Blanchard said. “Some of them were already picking up so good in the office area, somebody else is going to be great in the food industry, somebody might be better at the gardens outside because they're so fascinated with being outside all the time. So, it just takes steps.”

Their goal is when leaving the program their families have a better idea of the direction they're going to go in — as well as themselves.

Loudon has been going to job sites, most recently the Central Kitchen and then to Schertz Elementary.

On Wednesday, she was Blanchard's assistant. They went to the ReStore where a couple of students were, then returned to the center.

“She loves to be out,” Blanchard said.

MacGillis said she's really happy there is the opportunity for Loudon to get skill building again outside of the walls of the classroom.

“It’s important to work on life skills, but if we want her to have any kind of competitive employment that’s really what is needed,” MacGillis said.

“Again, I’m so happy New Braunfels district finally came around and said yes we need to do this. As every parent wants for their kid in the classroom, it’s more one on one. And if you look at the special needs population that’s especially true. So, I think she’ll really benefit from this.”

## **Hired or not**

However, some companies may not hire someone from the special needs community.

This year the Bureau Labor of Statistics said the employment-population ratio for people with a disability increased from 18.7 percent in 2017 to 19.1 percent in 2018.

The BLS also said people with a disability were much less likely to be employed, and like the general population that comes down to education.

“Among both groups, those who had attained higher levels of education were more likely to be employed than those who had attained less education.”

Nicole Hughey, NBISD special education coordinator, said a company may not necessarily be ready to hire somebody right away, but the goal is let the students build the skills necessary to be employed.

Martha Moke, NBISD executive director of special education, thinks a great part of this program lies in the exposure, with Blanchard searching for job sites and getting students out there and educating business owners about very good potential employees available.

“Employers don't realize how valuable our students are because they are very dedicated and very reliable employees once they're placed,” Moke said.

### **Four years or less**

While the program is for young adults ages 18 to 22, students don't have to stay all four years.

They can leave once they're ready.

The thought of it being a seamless transition as possible from her last day here to her first day of the real world is very appealing to me,” MacGillis said of Loudon. “And it's not good for anybody — for her to be just sitting around. I don't want that for her. I want her to feel like a productive member of society. Even if you know again it takes a little while to get there. I want to see her happy in life.”

She begins to tear up.

“That's what most parents want for their kids, happy,” she continued. “I want her to be happy and successful — whatever that means for her. She's going to create that definition as we go. So just to keep going and

have her back in those situations because someday the parents are not going to be here. Does that mean it's a long road? Yeah it is. It's scary. But I feel like we set up the best support we can."



High quality care comes with a cost



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Groups open possibilities for those with special needs



Children with special needs face violence, abuse



