

**Aspire's Mission:**

*Aspire's mission is to support children and adults with developmental and similar disabilities, helping them to live their lives to the fullest by providing individualized assistance based on personal choices.*

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## Save the Date

**DDAWNY Family  
Committee Meeting**  
7 Community Drive  
Cheektowaga, NY  
Third Tuesday of the Month  
7:00 pm

*For more event information,  
please contact Amanda Rosenberg  
at 716-505-5514 or via email at  
Amanda.Rosenberg@aspirewny.org*

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## Aspire of WNY's Success Through Transition™

### Making Technology Work for Everyone



*Brendan is helping Tina with her iPad at Tech Today Buffalo.*

Even as things around us seem to be moving faster each and every day, the world of technology is moving at warp speed by comparison. Our daily lives are filled with gizmos, gadgets, and goodies that are all designed to keep us connected, informed, and online. However, for individuals with disabilities, technological advancements are proving to be incredibly important in assisting with communication,

movement, and independence. For Aspire of WNY's Technology Today team, these advancements are both challenging and rewarding at the same time.

Brendan Stapley is a Technology Evaluation Supervisor for Aspire's Tech Today program. One of his greatest challenges is keeping current with all of the new technologies that are available, figuring out how it all works, and its compatibility limitations. Other members of Tech Today face the same challenges in keeping up with emerging technologies. Once Brendan and the others have a grasp on it, they can determine how it can best be used for individuals in helping them achieve their goals.

While challenging, the benefits of technology for the recipients are undeniable. One recent success story involves a six-year-old girl named Molly, who was having difficulty accessing her Dynavox Communication Device. She suffers from a degenerative condition that is robbing her of stamina and her physical capabilities. Once she began home-schooling, she was missing out on opportunities to socialize with her peers and her physical limitations were limiting access to her environment.

"We conducted an evaluation of how she used her Dynavox and what her limitations with it were," explained Brendan. "Next, we contacted a local representative for a company (Tobii) that offers the eye-gaze technology. Being able to interface with her device using her eyes, proved to be much less physically demanding than her previous setup using a switch."

The use of this new technology has given Molly access to everything that a typical Windows computer offers to any of us: communication with her friends and family, personal entertainment through games, music, reading, and videos, and can also be used as a platform for her school work. The Technology Today team not only match people with technologies that are suited to help them, they are also available to train both the individual and their circle of support in how to use these assistive technologies.

For more information about Technology Today, contact Rebecca Smith, Coordinator of Technology Services, at 716-836-7232 (Buffalo) or at 716-743-8372 (Tonawanda).

# Wegmans Helps Aspire Introduce Students to the World of Work



WOW Interns are all smiles while working at Wegmans. From left to right: Steven, Rachel Gould, Matt, David, and Fred Torrell.

A recent collaboration between Aspire of WNY and Wegmans demonstrates why the supermarket chain annually ranks near the top of Fortune magazine's "Best Companies to Work For". Since 2011, Aspire has been providing a job skills enrichment program, called World of Work (WOW), to school-age students with disabilities. WOW combines classroom skills training with on-the-job internships at participating local businesses and exemplifies the possibilities that exist when doors to employment are opened to students facing mental or physical challenges. Aspire Coordinator of Student Services, Paula Kerber, worked closely with Lynne Moore, Wegmans Human Resources, while the Executive Team considered the WOW proposal. Finally, it was determined that the Wegmans Alberta Drive store would host WOW students for the 2015 fall semester.

Executive Chef Prepared Foods, Fred Torrell, spoke about Wegmans initial thoughts on the program.

"We were very impressed with the concept, and our team was receptive to the idea," he explains. "We really had to consider how we could ensure safety for the student interns, but we also wanted to make sure that if we participated, it would be meaningful for them also."

Torrell, along with Restaurant Manager, Jodie Kersten, and Café Coordinator, Rachel Gould, worked with Aspire and determined areas within Wegmans Prepared Foods Department that the interns could work and learn. Right from the start, Steven Barnas (Sweet Home HS), David Price (Cheektowaga - Pine

Hill), and Matt Garrison (North Tonawanda HS) were treated the same as others who come to work at the store. The team at Wegmans performed talent evaluations with each of them to determine their strengths and weaknesses, and while open to making accommodations, they found very few were necessary.

Monday through Thursday, between 11:30 am and 2:30 pm, Matt, Steve, and David followed their daily checklists under the direction of their Job Coach, Amy Pope, and helped the store during the lunchtime rush. They each had assigned areas where they kept the floors clean, helped refill display cases, shined the glass cases, and wiped down tables. The interns also played a role in helping the team prepare for special events, including putting together employee gift bags for Wegmans 100th anniversary celebration.

"It didn't take long for us to see how quickly they had mastered their tasks on the checklist," explained Jodie Kersten. "We were actively thinking about new ways that the students could help us and at the same time give them valuable experiences."

Finding the right business partners for WOW students is a key component to the ongoing success of the program. "Wegmans has been amazing so far," says WOW Associate/Job Coach, Amy Pope. "They have bought into the experience for the kids and made them feel like part of their team. When they gave the interns Wegmans shirts to wear, the boys were so proud and thrilled! It was special."

Not surprisingly, the WOW experience has had as much of an impact on the store and its employees as it has had for Aspire and the student interns. "We were honored to host these students," claims Torrell. "You cannot place a monetary value on the impact these kids have made on all of us, both personally and professionally."

Aspire of WNY is thrilled that Wegmans has agreed to host more students and are hoping to find even more local businesses willing to partner with them. As successes such as this one keep mounting, more parents and school districts are interested in having their students participate in the "World of Work". For more information on how your business can host WOW students or if you are interested in learning more about the program for your school district or child, please contact Paula Kerber, Aspire Coordinator of Student Services, at 716-505-5262 or [paula.kerber@aspirewny.org](mailto:paula.kerber@aspirewny.org).

# TRANSITIONING TO ADULT SERVICES

For parents of children with disabilities, the transition from school age years to adulthood can be challenging, to say the least. During school, a child's needs are coordinated through the special education process to include needed therapies and life skills training. Once school eligibility expires at 21 years of age, parents can sometimes feel abandoned. Destiny Danao is the mother of a 21-year-old young man who has a variety of challenges, including Autism.

"Since my son became an adult," Destiny explains, "it feels like we landed on another planet. Everything changed, and no continuation of services took place."

Destiny's experience is common for parents whose child with disabilities becomes an adult and the support system from within the school district is no longer there. Parents and advocates need to ensure that they are well informed about the services available for the child who is transitioning. In addition, one of the most important relationships for a parent whose child has a disability is with a Medicaid Service Coordinator (MSC). Another key in managing the transition to adulthood and maintaining the critical therapies without a lapse is to begin actively planning for adult transition as early as possible while your child is still in school.

Eventually, Destiny and her son were introduced to the services available at the Aspire Health Center, an Article 16 clinic. After assessments were completed, Destiny's son, Dilhat, began twice per week sessions for Physical Therapy and once a week in Speech Therapy.

"My son started to learn again," explains Destiny, with much relief. "He is much happier and is having less



Dilhat gets ready for Speech Therapy with Elizabeth Foglia, SLP

behavioral issues. The therapists that he is working with understand his needs and his condition."

Now that Destiny has Dilhat back on track with his therapies and other services, she is beginning to feel like she is back on planet Earth and that her son's transition is going in the right direction. Having a transition plan is critical, and here in New York State, the recommendation from the Office for People with Developmental Disabilities (OPWDD) is that your child's transition plan should be in place by the age of 15, but it can be started before that age. If you are unsure of how to begin a transition plan, speak with your MSC and the Committee on Special Education (CSE) in your school district.

For more information on Service Coordination, contact Pamela Synor, Coordinator of Intake Services at 716-505-5830.

## Glossary of Terms

**Office for People with Developmental Disabilities:** "OPWDD" This governmental agency provides funding to the local DDRO.

**Developmental Disabilities Regional Office:** "DDRO" State-operated office that works with non-profit agencies to fund services throughout Western New York.

**Medicaid Service Coordinator:** "MSC" An MSC is a person who assists the individual with choosing Medicaid service options and supporting them in their decisions.

**Person Centered Planning:** "PCP" This process focuses on creating a positive vision of the future for the individual based on their capabilities, strengths, and preferences.

## Comments, Suggestions or Ideas?

*If you have any comments, suggestions or a subject you would like to see in an upcoming newsletter, please contact Paula Kerber at 716-505-5262, or email [paula.kerber@aspirewny.org](mailto:paula.kerber@aspirewny.org).*

## Want an electronic copy of Transition Times?

*Send your email to: [paula.kerber@aspirewny.org](mailto:paula.kerber@aspirewny.org) and we'll send you an electronic version of Transition Times. Thanks for your interest!*



## West Seneca Schools and WOW: A Great Team!

Kristin Collins has been the Director of Special Education for the West Seneca Central School District for the past 12 years. In 2012, she met with the Aspire Coordinator of Student Services, Paula Kerber, to learn more about the World of Work Program (WOW). Since then, West Seneca Central has been a key supporter of Aspire's successful work skills enrichment program. Students participating in the WOW program learn and practice real-world skills through internships at participating local businesses. These skills and more are enhanced through classroom training also.

"That's key with the WOW program," Ms. Collins explained. "Teaching the students those soft skills is really important for their future success."

West Seneca has demonstrated their commitment to WOW by steadily increasing the numbers of students that they are sending through the program. This past school year, six West Seneca students were the beneficiaries of the unique WOW programming. Next year, West Seneca has budgeted for nine students to participate. The School District abides by their mission "to provide a diversified educational program which will produce literate, caring, ethical, responsible, and productive citizens who are capable of adapting to change."

According to Collins, the concepts of WOW are in perfect alignment with the District's mission for their students.

"WOW provides the right amount of support in the right settings. It's a perfect model," she stated recently. "As stewards of public monies, we have to be wise about where we spend our dollars. When you can find a program as good and as successful as WOW, you go ahead and spend the money because it is so worth it!"

Ms. Collins isn't the only supporter of WOW in the District. She speaks at length about how the student's parents bring up WOW during their CSE meetings and the positive impact that the program is having on their student's home life. She went on to say that the positive feedback comes from the teachers also. Year after year, WOW is having a positive impact on students across Western New York and truly helping them to prepare for adult-supportive employment and meaningful community participation in the future.

For more information on the WOW program contact Paula Kerber, Aspire Coordinator of Student Services, at 716-505-5262 or paula.kerber@aspirewny.org.



## DO I REALLY NEED A SERVICE COORDINATOR?

As a parent, trying to make sure your child has every opportunity to succeed in life can be overwhelming at times. As the parent of a child with a disability, overwhelming is an understatement. From managing your child's medical treatments to making the best decisions about their schooling to worrying about their future, being a special needs parent is a handful. Fortunately, there are wonderful, compassionate people who can help!

Maybe you have never explored avenues of support that are available to you and your child because you were afraid of dealing with a lot of red tape, or there never seemed to be enough time to do the research. Whatever the reasons, no matter how hard you try, you are still afraid that your child's needs aren't being met. If any of this sounds familiar, then it is time to engage the help of a Medicaid Service Coordinator (MSC). An MSC works for a Human Services agency, such as Aspire of WNY, and is available to help families acquire the necessary services for their special needs child. Your MSC is an expert at navigating the resources and requirements necessary to ensure that your child is receiving the services that they need for their future.

Here are some things you may not know about having a service coordinator:

- An MSC provides their services at NO COST to you or your family!
- Your Service Coordinator can help you find recreational/social opportunities for your loved one.
- Your MSC can help you find services to teach your loved one to gain independence within their capabilities.
- An MSC will be part of your Circle-of-Support and help you prepare for your child's life after school, and with residential placements in the future.
- Your Service Coordinator will help you acquire respite services to care for your loved one, allowing you to have time for yourself.

Having an MSC by your side is one of the most important decisions you will make as a special needs parent. It is never too late to start the process of getting a service coordinator, but the earlier you do it, the better off your family will be. Aspire of WNY has a dedicated staff of Service Coordinators, who are available to support you throughout the process. Call today for more information: In Erie/Niagara County 716-505-5830 or the Southern Tier 716-763-9070 or 800-940-9135.