

# THE STORY



## PROJECT SEARCH

Our Philadelphia Bureau of Vocational Rehabilitation Services (BVRs) office, the School District of Philadelphia (IU 26), the Department of Behavioral Health and Intellectual disability Services, Drexel University, the A.J. Drexel Autism Institute and Community Integrated Services have partnered for a number of years to make Project SEARCH available for students with disabilities at Drexel University and the School District of Philadelphia. Providing students with vocational training and work experiences, Project SEARCH prepares them to go to work! Some of the internship opportunities at Drexel University include working in housing/maintenance, the bookstore or parking, to name a few. At the School District of Philadelphia, students' responsibilities could include tasks such as creating/maintaining spreadsheets and assisting the IT department.

Eight interns with intellectual disabilities and autism attend Project SEARCH at Drexel each year and 10 work at the School District of Philadelphia site. With the exception of the 2019-2020 and 2020-2021 school years, both sites have successful employment outcomes of 70% or higher.

**Staff Shoutouts!** VR Counselors Jamie Luthy and Danielle Schwendiman

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# STUDENT HIGHLIGHTS

## KASSIM

**Attended:** George Washington High School

**Hobbies:** Playing sports like soccer

**Highlights from Project SEARCH:** Kassim enjoyed his internship with The Study on Drexel's campus the most, and he will be starting a part-time job there soon. He shared that his internship gave him courage and motivation, and he learned how to communicate and advocate for what he needs to succeed.



## TYMIR

**Attended:** Roxborough High School

**Hobbies:** Exercising and taking walks in the park

**Highlights from Project SEARCH:** When Tymir first started the program he was nervous to take public transportation, but, after practicing, he now feels more confident and has enjoyed his internship with Drexel Parking Services. As part of his internship, he takes record of the parking spaces to determine which spots are unoccupied.

**His advice for others:** Be ready to show up and do the job.

# CHRISTOPHER



**Attended:** Parkway West High School

**Hobbies:** Watching Canadian cartoons and anime and traveling to different places

**Highlights from Project SEARCH:**

Christopher enjoyed his internship with Baiada at the Close School of Entrepreneurship where he helped with administrative tasks. Project SEARCH has helped him feel more confident in communicating with others, and engaging in conversation with his peers has been one of the highlights of this program for him.

# NICHOLAS

**Attended:** Roxborough High School

**Hobbies:** Being outside and playing basketball

**Highlights from Project SEARCH:**

Nicholas really enjoyed his internship with Sodi Labs at the A.J. Drexel Autism Institute. Some of his tasks included scanning papers and cleaning the office, as well as other general office tasks. Helping people and working as a part of a team were some of the highlights of this program for him.





## KEVIN

**Attended:** Parkway West High School

**Hobbies:** Listening to music

**Highlights from Project SEARCH:** Kevin shared that this program has helped with his confidence. He has completed two internships and is starting his third with Aramark at Drexel. He enjoys being a leader in the classroom and hopes to be one in the workplace as well.

**His advice for others:** Focus on not getting too nervous. Just take the next step to do what you need to do.



## CHRISTIAN

**Attended:** Roxborough High School

**Hobbies:** Playing video games like Minecraft and Mario Kart

**Highlights from Project SEARCH:** Christian learned through his internships, which included working with Drexel Parking Services and the Recreation Center, that he enjoys organizing and managing inventory. He feels these internships have helped prepare him for future employment.



## TREYVON

**Attended:** Penn Treaty High School

**Hobbies:** Playing video games and sports

**Highlights from Project SEARCH:** Treyvon has interned with Student Life and the Recreation Center, as well as Aramark at Drexel. He feels that his internships have helped him learn how to communicate with others and learn different workplace skills.



# PROJECT CAREER LAUNCH

Project SEARCH has proven to be so successful locally that the school district, in collaboration with the same partners as Project SEARCH, has added another program, Project Career Launch, with a site at Drexel University and one at a Community College of Philadelphia campus. Each site has between 10-12 students, and the program's goal is to assist students who do not have an intellectual disability diagnosis but still need hands-on support to be successful in finding employment.



## PHILLIP LEE

**Attended:** Science Leadership Academy

**Internship:** Phillip works at the School District of Philadelphia, sorting, moving, casing and repairing Chromebooks.

**Internship Highlight:** Phillip shared that the connections the internship has given him have been the best benefit.

**Advice to Employers on Hiring People with Disabilities:** "Make sure to look at the big picture...Keep it in mind that they might be a very, very good worker. They might be very unique and be able to add something that nobody else was able to in the workforce."

# KAREN BRADLEY

Karen, an individual who happens to have hypermobility joint syndrome, began working with our York BVRs office after a diagnosis of foot drop left her unable to drive. To continue working and maintaining her independence, our York office provided home and office evaluations; vision therapy when she had visual disturbances caused by her connective tissue disorder; and funding for modifying her vehicle, including the installation of a lift that helped her get her walker and service dog in and out of the vehicle.

Karen's advice to others with disabilities is: "Don't be afraid to ask for and accept help." As a social worker for 39 years, she shared that it was challenging for her to reach out for assistance. She's used to being the one who helps others, even referring her patients to OVR over the years.

Regarding working with OVR, Karen said, "the support that this organization [OVR] has given me has also allowed me to enjoy my life outside of work, spending time with my family and friends. I would encourage that any individual with a disability reach out to OVR. You will be very surprised in how they can change your life for the better."

**Staff Shoutouts!** Kelsey Hurst, VR Counselor, and Ashley Wilson, VR Supervisor



**"Without OVR's intervention...I am relatively certain that I would no longer be gainfully employed. I recently celebrated my 35-year anniversary as a social worker at LGHealth. I am very grateful that OVR has helped me reach this milestone." - Karen**



# NOAH CHRONISTER



Noah shared that he felt welcomed and well understood by his co-workers throughout the internship and that the experience he gained would have a positive impact on his goal of working in technology. After the internship, Noah had more confidence in himself, as well as with meeting new people, and had also learned to be more flexible with schedule changes.

Noah was so successful in his position at CILCP that they allowed him to participate in an additional three weeks of employment prior to starting his second year of college.

**Staff Shoutouts!** Rosanny Reyes, VR Counselor; Patrick Kane, VR Supervisor; and Clerical Assistant 2s: Layla Olnick, Constance Schneck, Caitlin Courogen and Theresa Buck

Through our Harrisburg BVRs office and the Center for Independent Living of Central PA's (CILCP's) partnership, Noah was able to access a summer internship opportunity at CILCP.

Motivated by the success he recently had working through his concerns about his first year of college, Noah overcame some anxiety he had about employment to make this internship a success for both him and his employer. Some of the work that he accomplished during his internship included rebranding and creating CILCP videos, creating CILCP program related social media gifs, proof reading and clerical work.

"Noah was a pleasure to have at the CILCP over the summer. When we initially reviewed his resume, it was evident that he possessed skills and experience in technical areas that were of interest to the agency. We were pleasantly surprised to find out that he also had skills with video editing. Noah was able to knock out a bunch of high-value projects on our standing To Do list. It's hard to convey how important some of these projects were to us. Additionally, and maybe most importantly, he was an enthusiastic, upbeat person to work with. Noah was a great addition to our team."

- Janetta Williams-Green, CILCP CEO

# MATHEU DAVENPORT



Matheu, an individual with a learning disability and ADHD, began working with our Williamsport BVRs office while still in high school. During those years, OVR helped him access a work-based learning experience and driver's training, both of which he excelled in.

After high school, with tuition assistance from OVR, he attended Penn College to pursue an associate degree in their Engineering CAD Technology Program. After successful completion of that program, he applied to and was accepted into the college's Bachelor of Science Engineering Design Program, graduating with a B.S. in Engineering Design in May 2021.

After college, Matheu found employment at Andritz in Muncy, Pa, as a mechanical drafter. When asked about what he likes best in this role, Matheu said, "it's nice being able to do something that I went to school for. It's not a complete different world from the classroom."

Matheu credits his success at overcoming barriers to his mother who, he shared, "pushes me to grow and try my best. She helped me overcome most barriers I've faced".

Matheu's advice for other students with disabilities is that "though it may be difficult initially, this get[s] more doable and understandable. Make sure to take your time and ask for help."

**Staff Shoutouts!**  
VR Counselors Andrew Stockdale (retired) and Mindy Irwin; VR Supervisors Kim Herb, Nicholas Gabriel and Sandra Long-Johnson (retired); Clerical Assistant 3 Wendy Wilk; and Clerical Assistant 2 Theresa Bair



# KALEB "ERIC" HOPPER

Eric began working with our Washington BVRs office when he was a senior at West Greene High School. He is an individual who has autism, cyclothymic disorder, ADHD and oppositional defiant disorder. While in high school, he received counseling on postsecondary training opportunities, job exploration counseling and participated in paid work experiences.

Eric enrolled in our Commonwealth Technical Institute at the Hiram G. Andrews Center's (CTI at HGAC's) COR program in the spring of 2018 and started in its welding program in November 2019. He obtained his diploma in Welding Technology in April 2022 and started working as a welder at Lagonda Machine Shop in August of the same year. Throughout his time at CTI at HGAC, Eric faced and overcame adversity. As he was adjusting to the academic requirements of his program, independence and college life, his educational training program was interrupted by COVID-19. Through all of this, Eric persevered and succeeded. According to Eric's CTI at HGAC VR Counselor Jeffrey Dunbar, Eric "had a strong work ethic, was always punctual for class and invested in learning, not only his training program but personal growth [also]."



## Staff Shoutouts!

VR Counselors: Vanessa Sigley, Susan Seeman, Amy Moore, Jeffrey Dunbar, Jeffrey Kachmarek, Galen Miller and Susan Bosetti

Clerical Assistant 2s: Cindy Barghausen and Michelle Anderson

VR Supervisors: Kelly Shaler, Martin Tran and Teri Michael

Michelle Parola, Fiscal Assistant; Jason Gies, VR Manager; Krista Sloan, Youth Ambassador Liaison Specialist; and Bobbi Jo Allison, Psychological Services Associate

About his experience at CTI at HGAC, Eric shared that the school "sets people up to succeed." He further shared that "group therapy would help me get beyond my comfort zone and make me talk to more people." The dorm counselors offered additional support to help him succeed as well.

Eric has been supported throughout his life by his grandmother. After he obtained employment, she shared that he absolutely loves his job. CTI at HGAC not only taught him welding, she said, but also people skills and how to interact in the community. She went on to add that she will forever be grateful for the services OVR provided.

Eric's advice for other students with disabilities as they consider work and postsecondary options is to "show up on time. Be consistent at work. Be able to work independently or with others. Be open to learn new things."

# SETH FENNER



Through a partnership with our Erie BVRs office, Confections of a Cake Lover and IU5, Seth was able to access an On-the-Job Training (OJT) opportunity that provided wage reimbursement for his employer.

This collaboration also included partnering to coordinate ASL interpreting for Seth, an individual who has Auditory Processing Disorder, to succeed. Seth shared that the biggest challenge for him was to stay on tasks or complete the tasks in order. He produces quality work at a fast pace; however, he struggled to move onto the next task or find something else to do, like clean up his workstation, sweep or wash dishes. The Confections of a Cake Lover team came up with a picture checklist for him. Once he completed his tasks, he could see what he needed to do next. Communication was the next challenge, and, to overcome this challenge, his employer and coworkers have all started to learn ASL to communicate with him.

**"Be patient, show your passion for the job and your dreams will come true." - Seth**

Because of his success in his OJT, Seth became a permanent employee at Confections of a Cake lover as a cookie maker. One of Seth's most recent accomplishments was making 1,000 cookies in one shift, an accomplishment he shared he was both proud of and also surprised to have reached. What's his favorite task at work? "My favorite thing to make are the cookies," he shared, "and to taste test them!"

Seth said he enjoys his coworkers and the customers he sees daily. He stated that he also really enjoys getting a paycheck. His employer shared that "he is a valued employee, and we love him here!"

**Staff Shoutouts!** Samantha Smith, VR Counselor for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing; Tim McNamara, VR Counselor; and Clerical Assistant 2s: Darlene Bisbee and Jennifer Lawrence

# ZANE FULTON

Meet Zane, an 18-year-old senior at Marion Center High School who has a learning disability.

Through our Johnstown BVRS office, Zane was able to access a paid work experience and On-the-Job Training at Point Spring and Driveshaft in Indiana, Pa. The experience has been going so well that Zane is anticipated to remain a permanent employee following his graduation from high school this June.



Through this job, Zane has become more outgoing and developed greater confidence in himself and his abilities. Some of Zane's favorite work tasks include sorting and stocking parts and preparing boxes and pallets for recycling. He is also learning to run the forklift so that he can load and unload trucks. Mike Wolfe, the store manager, shared that Zane has been an asset to the company. The experience has been overwhelmingly positive for all involved and Zane fits in with the other employees in the shop.

Susan Bauer, Life Skills Support at Marion Center High School shared that "this job has made such a positive impact on Zane. He smiles all the time! The folks at Point Spring have given Zane a huge shot of confidence that has carried over into his school life. For someone who found it difficult to talk with adults, he was just gushing! He wanted to tell me all about the new things he was learning at work. He was excited to tell me that he might learn how to use the forklift. He has also learned how to advocate for himself...As a senior at Marion Center High School, Zane is focused on his future, and it is bright!"

**Staff Shoutouts!** Carol Nelsen, VR Counselor; Kathy Schrader, Assistant District Administrator; and Diane Custer, Clerical Assistant 3



# ANTHONY MURPHY

Anthony came to our Erie Bureau of Blindness & Visual Services (BBVS) office for help with removing barriers to employment due to his vision and hearing loss.

Through vision rehabilitation therapy; orientation and mobility training; assistance with hearing aids and hearing evaluations; and assistive technology evaluations, Anthony gained the skills he needed to be independent and successful in the workplace and life.

Some of the assistive technology that has helped him succeed includes screen reading software, a braille display, a braille note taker and a braille label maker.



After working with Erie BBVS, Anthony was able to find full-time employment as an Unemployment Compensation (UC) Intermittent Intake Interviewer at the Erie UC Service Center. With the help of job coaching, Anthony had a successful first few weeks on the job. BBVS conducted an assistive technology evaluation and helped the employer with finding recommended equipment and providing requested accommodations for Anthony.

Anthony shared that he feels confident now that he has the skills and tools necessary to be successful at his job.

**Staff Shoutouts!** Alecia Beam, VR Supervisor; Casandra Falkenhagen, Acting District Administrator; Dana Amann, Clerical Assistant 2; Janet Roach, Fiscal Assistant; Chris Cowan, Acting Bureau Manager; and Dawn Sokol, BBVS Director