



REAGAN'S STORY

BY JUDY RATCLIFF

My daughter Reagan's life is filled with work, friends and family. She works part-time as an office assistant with the Institute for Disability Studies (IDS) at The University of Southern Mississippi, Mississippi's University Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities. She also serves the community through TRIAD Services AmeriCorps.

Reagan, 33, has Down syndrome. During her school years, Reagan had wonderful opportunities and was included in all aspects of the general school programs. She participated in school plays, art programs, band, show choir and was even enrolled in an advanced placement U.S. history class at her high school. Her dream was to go to college like all of her friends. After her high school graduation, our family moved to the Hattiesburg, Mississippi, area. Reagan's cousin and aunt were teachers at Jones County Junior College, and they helped facilitate some on campus opportunities for her. She was part of the JCJC marching band and the journalism/yearbook class for one year. In addition, she worked at the JCJC cafeteria.

After these wonderful experiences, there were some lean years in which we struggled to find a way for Reagan to continue to grow and mature and be

productive in the community. We saw the sparkle in her eyes diminish and noticed that she began to lose some of the skills she had gained over the years.

Then we were introduced to IDS and the STEP UP to Leadership Council. Through this connection, Reagan has become an active member of TRIAD Service AmeriCorps, and we began to see her eyes light up again. We saw the joy and enthusiasm she exhibited from working with others who valued her and treated her as an important contributor to society. We saw her grow and mature as she became a part of a group of young adults and developed relationships within the group. It was wonderful to see her have a group of friends again, to feel important again, and to have her thoughts, opinions and ideas valued as the group worked together to accomplish their goals.

Through these experiences and the guidance of the leadership at IDS, Reagan is learning to advocate for herself and others. She freely and thoughtfully expresses her desires and goals.

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Her TRIAD Service AmeriCorps experiences have enabled her to understand and have a desire for providing services to others. And she has learned about herself and others as she has worked with the team to assist in wheelchair basketball tournaments, cleaning up after a tornado, and educating others about disabilities. She has gained confidence as she has learned new communication skills and a sense of pride in using her skills to help others.

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The IDS office has assisted Reagan in accomplishing a personal goal of working with children. She proudly volunteered at the Child Development Center on campus. She gained new skills as she worked beside teachers and child care workers and interacted with the children, reading to them and playing games.

Reagan learned that speech therapy was available to her through the Speech and Hearing Sciences Department at Southern Miss, and she pursued and obtained access to those services. She requested that the speech therapist help her refine her skills for answering the telephone so she could do a better job at her work as an office assistant. Reagan discovered how to obtain assistance in getting across campus to her speech therapy sessions.

One of Reagan's life goals has been to "go to college." Although she was fortunate to have the experiences at JCJC for one year, she has continued to want to take college classes and "be a college student." She has truly been an advocate for herself in this area, and the IDS leadership staff are working with her to make this happen. Reagan has completed the Southern Miss registration packet, with assistance, and presented it to the Registrar's Office. The staff at IDS are assisting her with finding an appropriate class in which to enroll. She is so happy about this and is looking forward to accomplishing that goal.



Reagan is a smart, funny and responsible young lady. As parents, we have never allowed anyone to suggest she could not do something until she had the opportunity to prove whether or not she could. The approach we have seen through IDS appears to hold to that same philosophy. They focus on the abilities they see in young adults. Through discussions with leaders and others in the group, Reagan has gained a better understanding of her abilities.

Through the experiences she has had because of IDS, Reagan has gained confidence in expressing her ideas and her desires for bettering herself. She has become more independent in her decision-making. She knows how to advocate for herself and for others. She feels confident that she is contributing to something important every day. The sparkle we see in her eyes is the best indicator of all that life is good.

In her own words, when asked what she has gained through her experiences with IDS, she said she has learned "to be myself, to speak up very clearly, to be more of an adult, to work together as a team, to never give up, to follow my dreams, to be delightful and to be a Southern Miss fan. Southern Miss is always #1!"

