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Personal Reflections from ePortfolio: AHRC New York City

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by Alexis Minneo

Alexis Minneo



My Biography: What I Am Bringing to AHRC New York City

Hi my name is Alexis Minneo, however I prefer to be called Lexi. I am a first year senior in the BBA Public Accounting/ MS in Taxation program. At Pace I am involved with a couple organizations—I am the Vice President of Successful Women at Pace (SWAP) and I'm also the Secretary of the Beta Gamma Sigma-International Honors Society, and I am a member of both ALPHA and ASCEND. Besides school and clubs, I also delegate a large amount of my time to working—I waitress at Romano's Macaroni Grill and also work occasional overnight shifts at American Eagle Outfitters; I do it for the discount. In my free time I enjoy running and hope to participate in a 10k or half-marathon soon—I also travel every other month to South Carolina to visit my boyfriend.

In high school I tried to participate in a variety of community service projects—I was a member of Z-club in which I helped run a flower sale to raise money for our school. I also coached an 8th grade girl's basketball team from the months of December-February. I received an Emergency Medical Technician certification my junior year of high school and thus performed some community service volunteering in

a local hospital. Lastly, I helped an organization called Cool Roofs, paint a roof in the Bronx to help lower the resident's energy use and bills.

In respect to Autism and special needs, I have a vast amount of experience there. My Mom is an ABA therapist and works both at school and home programs Autistic children. I am also the cousin of a beautiful 10-year girl who has been classified with MR, so individuals with disabilities touch my life every day.

With my classmate, Taryn



My Personal Journey on the Project at AHRC New York City

Critique (on Professor Questions) of 9/9/14

Critique 1

1. AutismSpeaks.Org

The homepage was a little chaotic—the site has many different links to other pages within the site along with external links. The most important features were tabbed at the top, the categories

including: Families & Adults, Research, Advocate, and Get Involved. Despite the many links on the homepage, I was impressed by the magnitude in both amount and variety that the website featured. It is definitely an easy site to navigate, with all the pages clearly laid out for the user. This site would be an excellent source for education about Autism or ways to get involved.

2. Autism-Society.Org

This website was definitely less flashy than AustimSpeaks.Org however it included a lot of the same principles—About Autism, Living with Autism, Get Involved, Research, etc. All of the tabs led to a variety of following subset categories that were easy to locate and utilize. This site would be a great start for any one wanting to learn or just get involved.

3. AutismAwareness.Org

Out of the three sites I visited, AustismAwareness.Org was the one with the least amount of information and most difficult to navigate. Instead of displaying information on their webpage, most of their tabs just lead you to other webpages—which is frustrating. The goal of the website is to give answers but they do so very indirectly.

Critique 2

1. AAC SpeechBuddy—This app runs on Apple and Android products and allows the user to create a variety of different way to effectively communicate. The app has a library of 2000+ images that the user can use to create personalized speech boards. They can also go ahead and record their own voices and use the recordings as part of their boards. This app may be fun for an autistic teenager because it could give them the skills to communicate faster and more effectively—if the teenager was nonverbal.
2. Coloring with Minecraft—This app runs only on the iPad but gives users 36 different pictures to color with 36 different choices. The app helps build hand-eye coordination and helps develop creative skills. It can also be a self-esteem booster for autistic teenagers because they can save their creations or email them to friends and family—and they won't become discouraged if they cannot color within the lines or mess up because everything on the app is fixable as opposed to physical coloring books.
3. Give Me 5!- This app runs single player on apple products and multiplayer on Android products. The app provides an interactive game utilizing videos and social scenarios. It shows a short clip, which is followed by questions regarding appropriate corresponding social behavior. It can help ease anxiety by preparing autistic teens for real life situations and it can also give them an source of stimulation and entertainment, while also being educational.

Critique 3

There are a variety of ways in which Google Glass can help teenagers with Autism. One program that has been given a lot of special attention is a face recognition software which can be engineered to track emotions—this technology could help autistic teens better understand social cues and

appropriate behavior in social settings. Since autism strongly affects people's ability to outwardly communicate and understand others, this technology can also help teenagers understand other people's emotions and help them draw correlations between actions and corresponding emotional results. Adversely, Google Glass can also be used to document autistic teens daily routines, rituals, and behaviors—the footage could then be analyzed to better understand behavioral episodes, triggers, or maybe impulses.

Critique (on Professor Questions) of 9/16/14

- Evaluate how you may apply Diament, Michael (2014), Kids with Autism See Big Gains with Tablets, Disability Scoop, www.disabilityscoop.com, September 4, pp. 1-3, on your forthcoming project

For nonverbal Autistic teens, Tablets could be an extremely effective means of communication. Since our forthcoming project involves learning about and understanding our partner, the tablet can aid in crossing the communication barrier that Autism can create. Even in verbal teens, they may have trouble trying to get a point across which can once again be aided by the use of a tablet as an intermediary.

- Google "The Rights of People with Cognitive Disabilities to Technology and Information Access" and highlight the important rights that may be applied immediately to high school students with developmental and intellectual disabilities; and also separately

Technology is going to be the key to education so there is a movement to provide individuals with cognitive disabilities with a range of technology, giving them opportunities for growth that had not existed before. Software can be engineered to meet the needs of a variety of disabilities. Providing access to individuals with disabilities could give them a better quality of life—in respect to high school students, they are at a crucial time for development before the window starts to close. Technology can offer these kids a burst of development that many other people were unable to experience.

- Google "Autistic Teen in Sick Ice Bucket Challenge" and indicate your opinion as to the event as atypical or typical of events impacting individuals with developmental and intellectual disabilities in our society.

I believe that disgusting event is atypical of society today—or at least I strongly hope so. I am not naïve to the fact that the bullying of special needs people occurs, however I do feel that crude incidents like this one are not the norm but the exception. The public understanding and feelings towards people with disability is vastly different today than twenty years ago—as a society there have been massive movements to raise awareness and compassion for these people. I think a large numbers of families are touched in some way by special needs, myself included. With rates of autism, MR, and Down Syndrome so high, I cannot image that most people are so misguided as disturbed as the teens in this incident to have such a poor understanding of this autistic teen that they could commit such a despicable act against him.

Blog (on Partner and Project) of 9/23/14

I was excited and also nervous today to be meeting my partner for this semester. However immediately upon meeting Thomas I disregarded all anxiety and was only excited to work with such an interesting person. At first it was a little awkward trying to learn more about him, but the longer we spoke the easier the questions came and more lengthy answers I received. I learned that we are actually both the same age and that he lives in Brooklyn with five siblings--he has a love of basketball, especially when it comes to the Knicks. I was surprised at how quickly class time had gone by and how enjoyable this experience had been, and at the end I found myself genuinely looking forward to not only next week but also all the exciting things we will be doing this semester.

Critique of 9/30/14

The composition of a typical child's brain and a child with autism's brain has physical differences. People with autism have a noticeable increase in the number of brain connections—which leads to short-circuiting or comparably misfires in their brains therefore causing them difficulty to perform a variety of tasks. Technology has proven that these extra connections exist but more interestingly modern technology can now show how these differences came to exist. A recent study found that other children may be born with these same connections but their brains instinctively weed them out as they develop—this process does not occur in autistic children; this phenomenon may also shed some light on cases where children were born seemingly typical and then regressed at eighteen months. This finding is groundbreaking in that scientists can now try to pin point where the change happens and maybe a way to induce it in children with autism. Drugs are being researched and tested that could potentially eliminate some of these extra connections.

Blog of 10/7/14

Last week I worked with Brittany--but I was happy to be working with my original partner, Thomas, again. I am very comfortable working with either partner. Since we had limited time today, I tried to hurry along the web design assignment with Thomas so that he would finish it on time. He was assigned the topic of New York State--we started by looking up attractions in both NYC and NY state. We looked at some fun facts about who founded New York along with current political representatives. We also included a section about the Museum of Moving Image, its Thomas's favorite museum and he hopes to work there one day as a custodian. We finished the assignment with some time to spare so I began teaching him how to play chess--you can play on the computer so I figured it would be a fun, new, and challenging activity for him to learn and play in his leisure time. He liked it, and seemed to catch on pretty quickly. For the most part, we had a great class, however I did notice he was upset in the beginning. If I understood correctly, his parents told him that he cannot commute alone to college for his custodian training, which he was pretty upset about, but once he became distracted by the project he mostly forgot about it.

Critique of 10/7/14

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) provides individuals with disabilities the equal opportunity to gain employment by prohibiting discrimination through hiring, training, and firing process, and also in respect to pay, promotion, and benefits. The advances in this act will be widely helpful to my high school partner when he graduates—he will qualify and want an opportunity to work. He plans on being a custodian. The ADA also has a provision for “reasonable accommodation” which is a change or adjustment that makes the employment of an individual with disabilities possible—provisions include adding a ramp, providing sign language interpreters, providing quieter work spaces for individuals who are easily distracted, or converting written materials into Braille or onto audio tape. ADA also has Equal Employee Opportunity Commission (EEOC) offices which are available to people who feel their rights, granted by the ADA, have been violated—however there are time contingencies on these reports depending on the state, they range from 180-300 days post the incident. This act will greatly affect my partner in that not only it will help get him a job, but also it will help prevent his mistreatment on the job and provide a solution and criminal response if he is unfortunately mistreated. Incidents like the one that occurred at Papa Johns are not uncommon by any means, based on the statistics on the ADA website it seems that these events are common and steady in their consistency—in 2013, there were 25,927 incidents reports, in 2012 there were 26,379, and in 2011 there were 25,742. With greater knowledge of what exactly the ADA provides to individuals with disabilities and more understanding of their needs as a society hopefully this number can be minimized in the following years.

Critique of 10/14/14

In the past years—I have definitely noticed the incorporation of more individuals with disabilities in popular movies and TV shows, along with movies in general featuring more stories of individuals with disabilities, but played by actors without such disabilities. I think one of the best and most recent examples is Jamie Brewer, a woman with downs syndrome, has been featured and has been a leading character in several seasons of American Horror Story. Although the show is fiction, incorporating an individual with disabilities gives more reality to the show because that is the reality we live in—there is a significant prevalence of people with disabilities and to ignore so in TV and movies just negates their real aspect. Jamie Brewer often plays the underdog or someone with a special affinity—which gives a sense of comfort to viewers because it almost provides an equal playing field. In the show, she is born with Down syndrome but she can see the dead, she has strong powers, she is clairvoyant and wise. It is an interesting way to incorporate special needs into the show—to compare with actors who play an individual with disabilities some recent hits have been Silver Linings Playbook. Bradley Cooper and Robert De Niro play individuals suffering from mental illness, bi-polar and obsessive compulsive disorder respectively. Although the movie brings attention to such ailments—somehow it feels more like a portfolio builder than a genuine rendition. I feel this happens when big actors play parts that people know are seemingly not relatable to them. Bradley Cooper and Robert De Niro are so well known that it’s hard to accept their parts in the movie because we know it is fake. However when actors, who are not well known, play these parts it is an entirely different experience—such was the case in What’s Eating Gilbert Grape with Leonardo Decaprio or Miracle Run with Zac Efron. These movies have a much more realistic feel because the audience was clueless as to

whether the parts were played by people acting dealing with the disabilities or by very good actors—at the time they were made both actors were just beginning their career. Whether it has this genuine experience or not, it is great that TV and movies are giving attention to an aspect of life that has been ignored in the past.

My Mid-Term Reflection Journal on [Book - Suskind]

It is difficult to assess the personal progress made with my partner given that I have only worked with him for three class times. However after reading, *Life, Animated*, by Ron Suskind, I was given a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of relationships with people on the Autistic Disorder Spectrum and therefore my relationship with my partner, Thomas.

To give some background on my understanding prior to reading this novel, the first time I had any conscious knowledge of autism was when I was in fourth grade. Kelsey, a girl of my age and on the spectrum, was put in inclusion in my class and seated next to me. I was terrified of her—she would make sounds I did not understand and our classmates would stare at her. I would be uncomfortable by their stares even though they were not aimed directly at me—I was so troubled by her that I asked to have my seat moved. My mother would often try and reinforce that Kelsey could not help her outbursts and would try and explain Autism to me, but I simply did not understand.

Several years later, my mom found her true calling in the world and pursued an ABA-Therapy certification. She of course obtained it and began working at a well-known and wonderful ABA Program at an elementary school in New Jersey. Even then, I still did not understand why or how she did her job—how she worked with these unpredictable and sometimes violent children. I was baffled and still afraid, but she forced me to understand and see a bigger picture. She would introduce me to her kids and then I began to understand they had lost the light in their eyes. I understood that these kids were buried so deeply within themselves, and it was heartbreaking.

As fate would have it—my mother’s twin sister gave birth to a special needs child and only then could I truly begin to grasp the struggle that not only a child with disabilities faces, but also their families. When you discover that your loved one is “not typical” and will never be “typical” you begin to mourn the life you had wanted for them. I am sure that when Thomas’s parents realized something was astray and when their suspicions were confirmed that they probably faced the same reaction as my family had along with the Suskind family. Ron speaks about denial throughout the beginning of the book and how they refused to describe Owen as “autistic” (Page 8). Every parent goes through some stage of denial because it is too painful to believe that the child you thought you had is gone, like in Owen’s case—he regressed at eighteen months (Page 3), or that your child will never be a fully functioning independent member of society, like my cousin, Talia. As sad and heartbreaking as this truth is—there is a light for many children, the key.

My mother often talks to me about the key to unlock these kids—it is something that opens up their mind and gives them an ability to speak and connect. For Owen, it was Disney movies, using them as a parallel to the real world; Owen used them to understand facial expressions, tone inflections, relationships, and how to read (Page 53). I wonder what Thomas’s key is, given that he is so high

functioning and verbal. I've noticed he has a great interest in trains and the MTA in general—so I have wondered since our first meeting if this was something that unlocked him. I have also noticed it is something he becomes stuck on—Thomas will sometimes fixate over things and continuously Google them in an attempt to better understand them, similar to how Owen would repeatedly rewind and replay scenes in the movies (Page 76). Besides “the key” so to speak, when a family member is on the spectrum or special needs an entire new terminology and new family dynamic emerges.

Families begin seeing the world in the context of milestones and small accomplishments and new dynamics come into play for every member. I'm sure for Thomas's family every step closer to where he is now was an insurmountable accomplishment, but like Walt, Thomas's siblings whole lives have altered and that of course has good and bad consequences. For my family, Talia's young sister, Lucia, hides every thing she cares about, from a doll to a drawing on a napkin because she is so inherently afraid her sister will destroy it. As for Talia's older sister, Gianna, she is so accomplished and motivated as if she is living in the real world for both of them. Gianna and Walt have many similarities—Walt lived for Owen. He was extremely independent, went off to college, became very successful but he was also troubled. Thomas sometimes engages in self-talk, autistic behaviors can be embarrassing for family members. As Walt later noted to his parents—he would asked to be dropped off a couple blocks away from school to avoid classmates seeing Owen.

Every family with a special needs or spectrum child could agree that it is not an easy journey, instead it is one filled with challenges that these children must face at every corner—with the last and most important one being where will they go when they age out. For Owen, his parents were able to finance his halfway house, his college, and probably everything and anything that came afterwards—however most families simply do not have those resources. Since the first day meeting Thomas, he has repeatedly told me his plan post AHRC—it is another thing that he fixates on. Thomas is going to college; it may be a trade school, to learn how to be a custodian. Afterwards he is determined to work at the Museum of Moving Image in Astoria, Queens; it is his favorite museum. Luckily for Thomas this dream may very well be achievable, he has been given enough resources by AHRC to hopefully be able to be a custodian at a Museum that he loves so much. Most likely though there will always be limitations for Thomas, as he told me a few weeks ago, he was extremely upset that his parents told him he was unable to take the trains alone. He obsessed over the definition of unable and became very sullen when he realized it meant was not capable of doing something—I felt so upset for him that he realizes he is different and that other people can do things he cannot. We talked about it for a little while and I distracted him from his own thoughts by applying some homework. The moment was so representative of the struggle Thomas will face for the rest of his life—he will always have two steps forward, one step back; it is just the nature of Autism.

Through reading the novel and working with Thomas, I have drawn many parallels that I had once not noticed. I see so many of the same struggles, accomplishments, and behaviors that both Owen and Thomas exhibit. Each week is different with him—sometimes he is able to hold light conversations, sometimes he does a lot of double-talk, repeating whatever I say. I am happy though that I have the opportunity to connect with Thomas and make any kind of difference, like my mom does, in the life of a person who will face and overcome obstacles that I cannot imagine.

Blog of 10/21/14

Thomas and I worked on three worksheets--we wrapped up one from last week dealing with different definitions and depictions of words relating to New York. We also completed a worksheet of a timeline of Bill de Blasio--from being born to becoming the 109th New York City Mayor. Lastly, we did the worksheet requiring us to print pictures relating to New York and describe them--Thomas found this one most interesting. He picked a lot of New York sport teams such as the Yankees, Giants, and Knicks (his favorite team) and I suggested we include some images of the New York state tree and bird. After we finished the homework, I tried to play checkers with him but he did not quite grasp the concept of the game nor did he want to hear me explain it again, so I tried to engage him in another activity but he politely told me he wanted to do his own thing and to leave him alone. We did a lot of work that day so I obliged.

Critique of 10/28/14

After reading the article "To Siri, With Love" I reflected on my experience with Thomas and decided that Siri could potentially be an inspiration to my partner. The article highlights that people with autism struggle to understand social cues and appropriate responses, which is not an issue with Siri. She or He, based on the settings, will always respond politely, monotone, and without facial expression—that makes the job of understanding language a lot easier for an individual with autism. My partner, Thomas, sometimes struggles to understand what I am saying and I've noticed he really studies my facial expression when I speak. He also tends to repeat my statements back for clarification. I think if he spoke to Siri—he would find that interaction much simpler and easier to understand. I also think he would really like being able to research topics of his interest, like the MTA and subways, by just asking Siri. The article definitely gave me a new perspective on Siri that I will incorporate into my project with Thomas.

Blog of 11/4/14

Professor Lawler gave a presentation about "the gap"--he began by addressing some common terminology such as "high-functioning", "low-functioning", etc. He spoke about the issue of placement after high school. For people with autism who fall at the high-functioning end of the spectrum--they have the option of college programs. Programs, where they must meet the academic level but struggle with social issues, enable them to come to college and have a team accommodate the areas where they need help--planning their day, starting projects, adjusting to changes in schedule. Below this level exists "the gap" where individuals are developed enough to complete tasks but cannot live on their own or go to college--he encouraged students to strive to find solutions to this big issue that is not being widely addressed.

Critique of 11/4/14

Pace University offers the Ongoing Academic and Social Instructional Support (OASIS) Program for students with autism, Asperger syndrome, learning disabilities, nonverbal learning differences and related challenges. The program is on the New York City campus and is small, with only about 30

participants, and inclusive. It is geared towards preparing individuals for community integration, career development, employment, and adult life. The program is modified to fit the needs of individuals with disabilities but the work is set at a college level. I think this is a great modification to Pace and really gives this small group a genuine college opportunity that they might not have received at other schools—however I feel it would be inappropriate for my partner, Thomas. The college level work would probably be too difficult for him despite the modifications that Pace makes—Thomas sometimes struggles to get through our class assignments that I would consider about middle school level difficulty. I believe for him personally the academic route would be too strenuous and that trade school would be a better option—which is actually what he plans on pursuing. Thomas has expressed to me several times that he plans to go to a custodial school.

Blog of 11/11/14

Instead of meeting at Pace for class--we traveled over to Williams Street to one of the AHRC adult facilities. I was a little overwhelmed at first because several individuals kept shaking my hands and introducing themselves to me. I was led to a room in the basement where a speech pathologist gave a presentation about devices to help people with disabilities communicate. We broke off into groups and I was paired with David, who I was initially a little intimidated by, but once we started communicating--my anxiety was put to ease. He had spent all hours preparing for our chat, programming things he wanted to tell me about himself and things he wanted to ask me into his device. I could tell he was so excited and happy to be talking to me--and happy to be able to communicate. He began working with the device a year ago and it changed his whole life--it was bittersweet. It was beautiful to know that at 49 he was able to find an outlet for all those things he had to say and physically was unable to, but it was also heart breaking to know that all his life he has probably wanted to speak and communicate but could not. Most of these experiences in this class make me reflect on my own family and my cousin who is "MR" because I know there are many times during her normal day when she wants to do something but cannot because of her disability. I know that when she encounters these obstacles a lot of times she just gives up or gets angry and then exhibits behaviors--my heart breaks for her and all people like her who face these challenges every day which most of us will never understand.

Blog of 12/2/14

Today Thomas and I finished our project--we added some slides about Thomas and his hobbies. We also included a slide with pictures of us along with a slide about his future and aspirations to be a custodian at the museum of moving image. I made him do the slides about himself--which really aggravated him. I asked that he write in full sentences, and he was really struggling to do that task. He lashed out at me several times but I ignored him that and instead told him he needed to move on and finish the assignment. I noticed in a general sense he was much more behavioral today--he raised his voice several times, did a lot of self-talk, or talked about random topics that had no string of logic to follow. He seemed upset and when I pressed, he confessed to me he was sad because he was really going to miss me when the class ended.

Critique of 12/2/14

Dear United States Congress,

I am very alarmed and disturbed to learn that we, the United States of America, the country that promotes freedom and equality to our diverse population has not ratified the United Nation's Convention on the Right of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) international treaty. We are supposed to provide an example to other nations, we are supposed to all be equal under the laws set forth by our Constitution, so how is it that we have not ratified this treaty but more than 140 other nations have taken this initiative—that is disgraceful.

The CRPD's purpose is to “promote, protect, and ensure the full and equal enjoyment of all human rights and fundamental freedoms by all persons with disabilities, and to promote respect for their inherent dignity”. It covers all ranges of disabilities under the social model, instead of the more inclusive medical model; this treaty provides a level playing field for the people who are most at risk of being treated unfairly. How can we call ourselves equal when a large proportion of our population is repeatedly discriminated against—especially in the workforce? Everyone in the U.S. should have the chance to be a productive part of the society. The CRPD would be a step in the right direction to enable that more people with disabilities to be involved—we should be finished with the days that we are sticking these individuals in the most convenient places such as grocery stores and fast food restaurants. If they are capable and willing, they should be given the chance to work wherever they set fit. Technology has given many people with disabilities the chance to communicate and function in a way they could not in the past.

We as a country need to keep pace with these advances and not fall behind and by not ratifying the CRPD—that is exactly what we are doing. If technology has given them a means, then we need to give them a way.

Blog (on Presentations) of 12/16/14

Today was the last day of class and it was really interesting to see everyone gathered together in one room. A couple parents had come and it was nice to see them with their kids--and to see the kids more at ease with their parents nearby. Thomas's parents were unable to come because they both work, however Thomas didn't seem too upset about it. He was very sad that today was our last day as partners for this class. He said when I first got there that he was preparing himself to leave very sad today. I hope our presentation took some of that away for him--he was so in his element in front of everyone. It was really a side of him that I have never seen. He barely let me read any slides--he wanted them all! After the presentations, I hugged Thomas a bunch of times and give him my email, it was very bittersweet.

My Final Reflection Journal on Impacts of Semester

When I selected CIS 102W: Web Design for a Non-profit organization to fulfill my AOK1 requirement, I had no idea what to expect in the upcoming semester. Learning on the first day of class

that I would be working with an autistic teenage for the semester—I thought to myself that if I was doing community service for Pace University, here is where I would make the most of my time. As I have mentioned throughout the semester, I have a special needs cousin, who is classified as MR, and my mother is an ABA-therapist, so people with disabilities have impacted my life for a long time.

I was nervous upon meeting Thomas, my AHRC partner for the semester—I had no idea as to how high or low functioning he would be and if I could handle any behaviors he may have during our time together. Those feelings were squelched after spending a couple minutes with him; Thomas was so thrilled to be part of the program again. He couldn't wait to get to know me and looked forward to our Tuesday mornings together. Over the semester I had less and less anxiety about being in a room full of people with disabilities—the occasional outbursts and sounds became commonplace. When I was younger these same outbursts often frightened me—when my cousin would exhibit behaviors like that; they never bothered me. I had this notion that because she is my blood, I can never love her less because of her disability. I feel like prior to this class, I still had some level of ignorance and discomfort when around people with disabilities—who were not my cousin.

Whenever I would visit my mother at work and be in a room full of kids with autism, I would feel a rising panic. I would never show it to my mother, because I was embarrassed that I felt that way. I had that same panic the first day that all the AHRC teenagers came in, but it went away—which amazed me. In my twenty-one years of life, I could never get that sensation to go away no matter the length of time I spent with anyone with disabilities. I realized over the weeks that I was looking at their disabilities and not them as people. The same reason I never felt that way about my cousin—I have always seen her as the beautiful little girl that she is, not the disability that affects her. I am thankful to this class that I was able to overcome the blinders that I had worn throughout life when looking at these unique and special people. The truest test of the difference for me was when we spent two hours at the AHRC adult facility.

When I walked into the facility—I immediately felt the panic; people were making noises and it wasn't until someone came up and introduced himself to me, four or five times because he was so excited, that I felt the panic dwindling. I was at ease and less on edge, until David came into the room. To crudely describe him, David is a non-verbal tall middle-aged black man—I was immediately intimidated by him. He was making occasional screeching sounds that I did not understand and he kept beckoning to me to communicate with him—which I did. He showed me his assisted speaking device. When they told us to break up into partners, I tried to separate myself from David because I was so uncomfortable by him but as it would happen, we were matched up. He started communicating with me through the assisted speaking device and I immediately felt like the biggest and most ignorant jerk. He had programmed things he wanted to share with us all morning—he told me that he lived very far uptown and took the train by himself each day to the facility. He told me his new favorite movie was *Brother Bear 2* and we programmed it into his device. David explained that up until a couple years ago, he couldn't communicate and that the device dramatically altered his life.

My heart broke for him. I realized in my time with David how much we all take for granted—to live half your life wanting to say every need or desire you have and being physically unable but watching everyone else around you communicate—that is truly one of the saddest and most isolating

situations I can imagine. After meeting David, I started to notice a variety of things that I took for granted that became highlighted by working with teenagers with disabilities. I watched Thomas struggle class after class to communicate back with me—he would perfectly understand what I was saying, but many times he was unable to form a verbal opinion back. Sometimes he would stare at me with the words at the tip of his tongue or he would repeat back to me what I said to me with the words in a different order. I also watched him struggle to form full sentences in his writing—he would get so angry with me when I asked him to write in full sentences. However I refused to take “I don’t want to” as an answer, I would encourage him telling him “you can do it” or “I know you can do it”. Every time I watched him struggle to do what most typical people would consider simple tasks, my heart broke for him in the same way it did for David.

There were many times this semester that the class forced me to really step back out of the moment and see a bigger picture. Seeing David and Thomas struggle and overcome different aspects of their disabilities forced me to realize how much more difficult their lives are and will continue to be as they grow older. College students worry about passing classes, going out with their friends, having a good time—when these people worry about how they can tell someone around them they have to use the bathroom, that they are hungry, or that they don’t feel well. Martin, Taryn’s partner, said during one class that he hated his parents. We asked him why and he said that he wished his father married somebody else so that maybe he wouldn’t have to have screwed up genes and be autistic. He was angry a lot of the time but how could anyone blame him—I would be angry too if I had to try a hundred times harder than everyone else around me to do the same things, when all I wanted to be was be like them—to know and understand that by some unexplainable and incurable occurrence that you developed differently and in return your life had massive mountains to overcome, when everyone else just strolled down the path. I have an empathy and understanding now for all people with disabilities, not simply my cousin, and I am thankful for gaining that through the course of this class.

My Certificate of Recognition of Service

