

From Being a High School Student to Discovering My Dream Job: How Professionals Can Empower People Like Me

I was a girl who had Down syndrome (Trisomy 21) who was an active part of my high school and middle school student body. Here is how professionals at my school helped to get me where I am now

First Time Leading: Middle School Student Body Vice President

In middle school, I decided to run for Vice President of the Student Body. But I was nervous, and knew that I would need support in breaking down barriers. So who helped me?

My middle school history teacher and a classmate!

My classmate helped me to promote my campaign, on the motto: “If George Bush can do it then so can I.”

Meanwhile, my history teacher, who was in charge of student leadership, supported my dream, and once I landed the position, made sure that the meetings were an open environment for me to lead.

I H E
M I R A C L E

W O R K E R



a play by WILLIAM GIBSON

Disability Representation in English Class

After reading “The Miracle Worker,” I found a hero in Helen Keller. While she and I have different disabilities, I was determined to become “the next” Helen Keller with Down syndrome. Reading this book and having the chance to examine it was beneficial for me, as seeing others with disabilities become leaders in the world began motivating me to do the same.

Pacific Grove High School

My experience in high school was very formative for me on my path as an advocate and eventual working professional. It did not all come easy though, and the teachers and mentors along the way helped make it all possible.

8th Grade Promotion/Transitioning to High School

While transitioning to high school was scary, I was lucky to be surrounded by people who encouraged me to immerse myself socially and engage in extracurriculars.

- My brother's friends, who knew me as his sister, pushed me to get involved in clubs.
- Teachers, especially in the performing arts, gave me the confidence to get on stage. Soon high school was fun, and I began to get more engaged.



Underclassmen Years

- During my freshman year, I choreographed a dance and performed it in front of my entire high school.
- During my sophomore year, an English teacher empowered me further by taking the time to help me write a play script and recruit classmates to perform. My vision was brought to life through a storyline of Greek gods and goddesses as characters in a present-day family. The setting was at Pacific Grove High School, and the performers were all my classmates. The show was a funny, captivating hit! With this new performance and choreography experience, I soon was nominated as Dance Team Captain.



Youth Leadership Forum for Students with Disabilities and the summer of 2006

During the summer before junior year, my school principal, Mr. Dodd, nominated me to apply for the **Governor's Youth Leadership Forum for Students with Disabilities**. After a competitive process, I was chosen to participate. Here, I was able to participate in discussions surrounding issues for students with disabilities.

It was a great opportunity and a step forward for me in terms of my understanding of disability leadership!



Upperclassmen Years

During my last two years of high school, I became highly involved through Leadership and the Associated Student Body (ASB). Here, school initiatives like Breaker Best were created, and I was able to take elevated leadership roles and witness new social experiences...



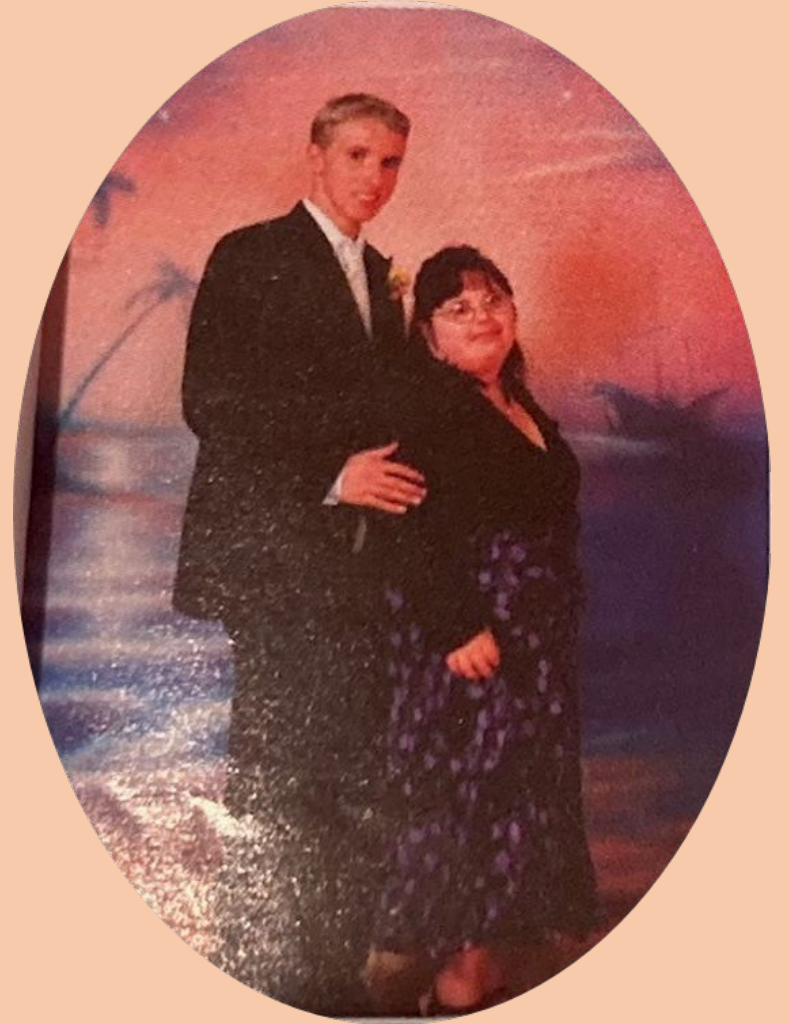
Breaker Best

The “Breaker Best” project made our school campus much more visually appealing. Here, we planted native plants and landscaped the "Pride Place" amphitheater that was used for spirit days and lunchtime activities. This project made my last two years of high school memorable.

A heartwarming Story

Through ASB and my new leadership positions, I met Creston, the Student Body President. During my junior year, Creston invited me to homecoming as his date!

Creston came over to our house, where my dad took photos of us. We went to dinner at a local restaurant and later arrived at the dance for an enchanted evening. The photo of us together at the dance made it into the yearbook. It was a memorable experience that I never thought that I, a student with Down Syndrome, would have.



Upside of Down Syndrome

As my high school graduation speaker, I was able to address my fellow graduates, saying: "School was always an uphill climb for me. We all have our disabilities and there are ways we can overcome them. Don't let others tell you otherwise that you can't."

Today, I am an advocate for people with disabilities, working as a professional at **North Bay Regional Center**.



Now that you've heard my story, here is what you can do to help students like me to succeed:

- Encourage participation in academic settings
- Make extracurricular activities open to students of all abilities: remember, students with disabilities may need extra encouragement to participate, **but it is 100% worth it for them!**
- Be aware of summer and leadership opportunities in the disability space
- Be mindful of each individual students' challenges and needs
- Highlight the strengths of students with disabilities and encourage them
- *And, whenever possible, encourage participation in IEP meetings*

Because IEP participation leads to success!

For School-age Students with disabilities

- Teachers and school resource teachers should encourage the student to participate
- Students should be present, if possible, during the meeting
- Parents should meet with their son or daughter before the meeting to come up with an agenda of what is working, and what needs improvement, with the school
- Teachers should constantly be aware of individual students' needs, and take a person-centered, encouraging approach

Professionals/individuals who were present and active during my IEP meetings, and others who can be of use to students:

- Mainstream class teachers and resource teachers
- Curriculum specialists
- Parents
- Aides
- Behavioral/Occupational/Speech therapists
- Reading specialists
- Paraprofessionals
- Parent attorneys

Questions

- What are some ways you are encouraging inclusive opportunities for students with disabilities in your classrooms and communities?
- What are some ways you would like to see your students become more independent and more involved at school?
- What are some barriers that teachers face in empowering students with disabilities?