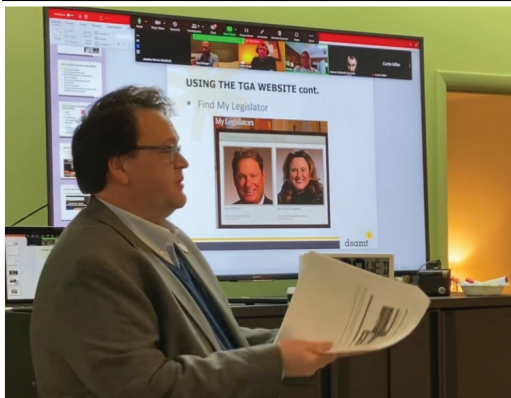
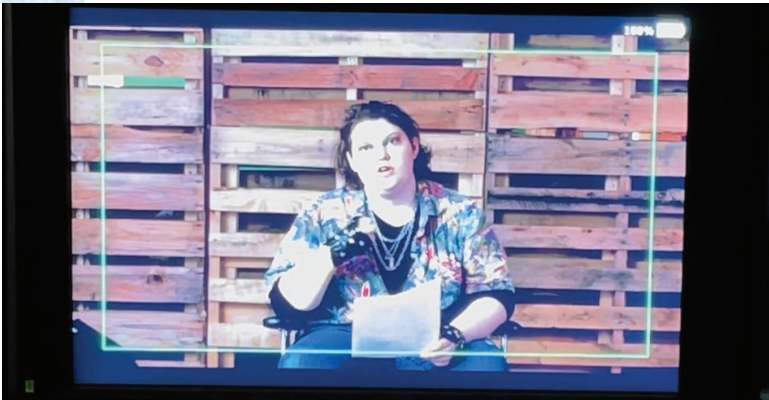


# Our Stories

A collection of personal stories by individuals with Down syndrome and/or Autism describing the realities of living with a disability and the various obstacles and challenges they face.



# Overview

Individuals with disabilities and their families are passionate about many issues that affect them, yet few feel confident and knowledgeable enough to craft and share their personal struggles with those who can implement systemic change, so many important stories go untold. The following pages represent a four-month collaboration between the Down Syndrome Association of Middle TN and Autism Tennessee to empower families and self-advocates to tell their stories.

In simplest terms, self-advocacy is about finding your voice, like learning how to ask for assistance in finding work. Self-direction is about using your voice, such as deciding where you want to work rather than having someone else make that choice for you. At the highest level, self-determination is owning your voice, and it can include taking the responsibility to maintain employment over a long period of time.

These stories both inform others of the realities of living with a disability and also raise awareness as to the various obstacles and challenges faced by individuals with disabilities and their families. Although various diagnoses are represented, themes emerged throughout this process – meaningful inclusion, transportation, safe and affordable housing options, difficulty navigating bureaucracy, awareness about disability, insurance and lack of appropriate public education. We hope these stories will intrigue you, earn your support and ultimately persuade you to help them achieve our goals.

AutismTN and DSAMT firmly believe that only when we empower our members to effectively share their stories, can we truly inspire sensitivity and understanding towards individuals with disabilities and result in dynamic change at the system level. By educating our members on why telling their stories is important, dispelling myths about advocacy, helping them craft and tell their stories, and finally, sharing those stories, we are able to begin to reach this goal.

On behalf of all our participants, we thank you for taking the time to read these stories and consider ways in which you can help.

In celebration & gratitude,



**Alecia Talbott**  
*Executive Director*  
DSAMT

Sincerely,



**Jessica Moore**  
*Interim Executive Director*  
AutismTN

# Table of Contents

Alexander Batson .....	4
Alonso Calderón Guzmán .....	5
Aneesa Ahmed .....	6
Brandon Anderson .....	7
Brian Williams .....	8
Destiny Weldon .....	9
Grace Ehinger .....	10
James Lampley .....	11
Josh Riley .....	12
Jovie Talbott .....	13
Keiston Flood .....	15
Kyrsten Henderson .....	16
Lucas Williams .....	17
Nora Freeman .....	18
Sharmane Pearson .....	19
Will McMillan .....	20
Notes .....	21
Thank You .....	22

# My story

## Alexander Batson

Age 7

*Mother: Royya James  
South Nashville, TN*



### My name is Alexander, and this is my story.

Alexander is seven years old, in the first grade and has Down syndrome. I am a single parent working full-time. We live in the South Nashville area, and I have been an active registered voter for over 25 years, since the age of 18. Like you, I also understand the importance of connecting and having an active voice in the community. As parents, we know the importance of caring and advocating for our children. As a black boy with special needs, Alexander is at a disadvantage in reaching his full potential due to lowered expectations and lack of professional therapeutic sports.

Alexander likes pancakes, chicken nuggets and French fries, swimming, playing basketball with his friends, watching Sesame Street and Peppa Pig, playing on his tablet, and he loves BIG hugs. Alexander's strengths include visual memorization of people, places and locations we've been or naming items in the fridge or in a store. He also excels in socialization. Once he warms up to you, you are his friend. He will remember you and whatever activity you did together, did from one day to a year ago.

Alexander struggles with speech, fine motor and gross motor skills. I understand most words Alexander speaks; however, I'm always having to say "what?" or "slow down and say it again." We have been practicing on jumping, literally getting two feet off the ground at the same time, since he was four, with little progress. Holding and gripping a pencil correctly may come naturally to some; but his deficit in this skill has limited his ability to write the letters of his name. Alexander receives only one total hour a week of therapy services during the school day. Most times, he's grouped with two or more students, further limiting his progress.

I work with him at home, however, as a full-time working parent, not professionally-trained in these areas, I can only do so much. I know with extra services, his areas of weakness would turn to strengths, and he would have a better chance at reaching his full potential. He has received therapy outside of school in the past, and with that additional support he thrived. But right now, it is not an option. We have been continuously denied consistent accessible therapy outside of the classroom that should be covered by our insurance. Unfortunately, as a single parent, I cannot afford to continuously pay for services out of pocket that his doctors, teachers and I all agree he clearly needs.

I am asking you to help us and thousands of other families who have been denied by insurance based on pre-determined factors and summary notes that do not provide the full extent of my child's needs. Please support funding more affordable or free options, such as occupational, physical and speech therapy for children like Alexander or ask insurance companies to make better decisions based on the need or medical diagnosis.

I appreciate your service and thank you for your time and support.

# My story

## Alonso Calderón Guzmán

Age 23

Nashville, TN



### My name is Alonso, and this is my story.

I have Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), and I was diagnosed late with Autism Spectrum Disorder last year at age twenty-two. I love to act, voice act, paint and draw/sketch, play video games and binge watch movies and television. What I would love to do in the future is to become a voice actor and actor, so I could show the predominantly neurotypical world what an Autistic individual, like myself, is capable of doing, especially in the entertainment industry.

Being undiagnosed until age 22 was extremely challenging for me most of my life. I was a victim of bullying in as many forms you could think of. I was alone with barely any friends. I was different from most neurotypicals, and it was very challenging for me to know who exactly I am, until receiving the Autism diagnosis.

Getting picked on, being a loner, being bullied, etc. were the main challenges I struggled with most of my educational life without a diagnosis. Many Autistics go undiagnosed and struggle, as I did.

What really concerns me is the fact that there are not enough licensed professionals to diagnose children, young adults, adults and seniors on the spectrum and the fact that the general public has such little understanding of what it is like to be Autistic. Getting the proper resources about Autism and other neurodevelopmental and/or developmental conditions is important and necessary to our success, yet most professionals a person comes in contact with (teachers, colleges, workplaces, etc.) do not have or only have very basic information. Being well-educated on Autism, what it is like to be Autistic, what our challenges are, and what our strengths are is important to know what we neurodivergents are capable of and to enable us to meaningfully participate in our community and be happy, productive, tax-paying members of society.

Thank you for your time for reading what I have to say.

# My story

## Aneesa Ahmed

Age 7

Mother: Momina Ahmed  
Nashville, TN



### My name is Aneesa, and this is my story.

My beautiful daughter was born with Down syndrome and is now in 2nd grade at Shayne elementary in Nashville TN. Aneesa is smart and the hardest working child I know. She loves playing basketball, soccer and some tennis, and she just got her green belt in karate. She is also in a musical play (Wonka) at her school.

It is always a battle with school system for Aneesa to get proper services, supports and for the school to follow the IEP (individualized education plan). It is a broken system for kids with special needs. They use a one-size-fits all approach, even though every individual has an IEP, and every kid is unique in their own way with different ways of learning.

Aneesa already knew her alphabet and sounds when she started kindergarten like her other peers, but because she has special needs their expectations were inaccurately low. They would put her in a separate room watching TV and playing puzzles with other kids with special needs, some nonverbal and

some with severe behavioral issues, even though she is verbal and doesn't have any behavioral issues.

After a long battle she finally began attending general education classes, but in the process my daughter missed almost the whole year of kindergarten learning. Just when I thought the battle was over, she got left out of general education classes because they didn't have a paraprofessional to take her to those classes. For a long period of time, she had to share a para professional with 3 or 4 other kids, and when that happens she has to go to the other kids' classes rather than her own classroom. Now she is in 2nd grade, and this year we are having the very same problem. Aneesa is independent and smart, but because of these issues, she is behind in school.

It is not easy as a single mother - advocating for my daughter, working full-time and supporting my daughter at home, etc. I am fortunate Aneesa doesn't have other medical issues, but instead of helping my daughter with her homework, bonding with her or focusing on other activities, I am spending my time and energy fighting with the school just to make sure she gets an appropriate education, as she deserves. It is a lot on me, and it has even gotten to the point of negatively affecting my health.

If it wasn't for the Down Syndrome Association Middle Tennessee, which helps me to advocate for my daughter, we wouldn't be where we are for Aneesa, although it is still ongoing battle.

I would love to see some changes in the school system for our kids to get the support and the education they deserve. Also, teachers and all other school staff members need training on how to treat and teach our children with special needs.

Thank you for listening to my story. It means a lot to us.

# My story

## Brandon Anderson

Age 18

*Mother: Judy Breen Anderson  
Bellevue, TN*



### My name is Brandon, and this is my story.

I'm a senior at Hillwood High School. I live in Bellevue with my mom, Judy Breen Anderson. I'm 18, and have Down syndrome. I love school! I participate in Special Olympics, Ainsley's Angels and Full Circle at the Bellevue YMCA.

**FROM MOM:** When Brandon's father and I divorced, I hadn't considered (nor did our lawyer suggest) that we make and agree upon financial support from both parents throughout his life. I needed a lawyer and tried to go through legal aide, but due to staffing, they couldn't help me. I have to pay for an attorney, which puts a significant financial strain me and Brandon. I've been in a legal battle now with his father for more than a year to provide financial support beyond age 18 - with no end in sight.

When one goes through a divorce and has a child with special needs, financial support for life of the child to be included in the final decree.

I propose that in divorce proceedings involving a child with special needs, a section or process is put into place for the one paying child support to be financially contributing in some form for the life of the child, as his/her needs will not decrease and may even increase throughout his/her life.

Brandon and I want to thank you for listening to our problem and hope that you can help us and many others that may had the same issue. Brandon needs security and needs it from both parents just not one of them. Please help us add the "Brandon Addition" to the final decree of a divorce.

# My Story

**Brian Williams**

Age 53

CLARKSVILLE, TN



## My name is Brian, and this is my story.

**My Journey, Experience & Proposal With Autism.** I am 53 years old, born & raised in Clarksville, TN near Ft. Campbell, KY. I was diagnosed with autism (as it was called Aspergers Syndrome in 2007).

In my journey with autism, I have discovered that others, like myself, have problems. Many will get diagnosed wrong. Many will not get proper help. Many will not understand for the diagnosis always comes with hearing that old saying, "You don't look like someone with autism."

Knowledge is the key. As you can see we all have something from autism to Down syndrome, but we all have different needs. From financial stability, medical care, therapy to just being accepted. Also, we are the midst of an enlarging growth of autism kids to adults in not just Tennessee but in the country as well.

For myself, as well as many minorities, we don't have the resources, some don't know what to do or even where to go for help. There is also the stereotypes and distrust that comes, despite the many advances and mental health care now at its highest acceptance that particular group more than ever before.

We are here today to let you hear our words and our stories; to let you know we all have one thing in common but with many variables and many different needs.

Thank you for listening and being here for all of us.



# My story

## Destiny Weldon

Age 21

Parents: Denise & Rob Weldon  
Nolensville, TN



### My name is Destiny, and this is my story.

I am an adult with Down Syndrome, and I live in Nolensville, Tennessee, with my mom, dad and brother, Sterlin. My sister, Desiree, lives in Michigan.

I have always been active in sports from elementary school through high school. I cheered, played basketball, soccer and ran track. I've participated in several fashion shows, dance groups and choir. I also really like to sing. For the past two years I've worked as a server at one of the coffee shops in my community.

The problem I have is not having a job coach or someone to help support me in my job duties. When I started working at the coffee shop, the owner acted as my job coach. She trained me, checked on me throughout the day and made sure I knew what I needed to do. As the business became more popular and busy her responsibilities changed. She was not able to check on me as often as she had before. Other employees were asked to make sure I knew what to do for the day. Some had never worked with or been around a person with a disability. I need people to be patient and understanding. I want them to see my abilities and know I could do my job.

I was being blamed for not giving customers the correct order, but I followed the ticket information and knew I had done the order correctly. I later found out that the person who took the order did it wrong but blamed me. The owner was not happy that she had to remake several orders because of this.

I talked to the owner 2 days later and told her I did read the ticket correctly. She went back and checked and found out that was right...I did do my job right!

I want people to not think they can blame me, without consequence. I will defend myself. If I'd had a job coach

this situation would have been handled differently. I would not have been seen as not doing my job correctly in front of customers and employees. Maybe there could be some type of job training to help employees understand the proper way to work with a co-worker who has a disability. I want to take what I have learned at my current job to be successful in my next job.

Thank You for listening to my story.

**FROM MOM** - Why doesn't Destiny have a job coach you ask? Well, she attended school from preschool to 8th grade, here in Williamson County. Then we moved to Colorado because of my husband's job. Destiny graduated from high school in Colorado.

When we moved back to Tennessee in 2019, we did not have access to the resources, programs and services offered for individuals with disabilities in Tennessee. This information is normally discussed with parents while their child is in high school or about to graduate. Destiny was 18 at this time and, because the school she graduated from did not offer a special needs diploma, she was not able to enroll in the transitions program in Williamson County.

So we set out to find services on our own. If you have a child that is preschool to middle school age there are tons of activities, events, etc. But, not many places offer activities for people who are 18 and older with disabilities.

Some of the places we contacted stated you had to be 21 to receive services or they only work with the students who are coming directly from the area school systems. Feeling frustrated, we stopped looking. A few months later, Destiny was offered a job at the coffee shop and things were good, at least for a while. It was not until recently that I found out about some organizations that offer job coaches. After contacting them I was told 1. There was a wait list or 2. There were other criteria that needed to be met to qualify to be a part of the program. I am starting to get connected, but it was not easy finding this information. There is a lot of conflicting information out there and no central location to find what's needed. I feel there needs to be a better way to search and find services that will help my daughter and other adults with disabilities. Especially if you move to Tennessee from another state.

Having a central resource would help enable my very capable daughter to have a meaningful, productive and happy life. Thank you.

# My story

## Grace Ehinger

Age 15

Parents: Steve & Sue Ehinger  
Nolensville, TN



### My name is Grace, and this is my story.

Grace is a freshman at Nolensville High School and loves horseback riding, dance, soccer and tennis. While Grace attends NHS and much of her school day she is included in the same classroom as her typical peers, once that final school bell rings that inclusion, unfortunately stops.

Along with academic activities, schools usually offer extra-curricular and nonacademic activities, which typically involve students of the same age and may be organized and supervised by school personnel. We found that many High Schools in our area do not offer these same activities to students with special needs.

Grace likes dance, soccer, tennis and horse riding – but all of these activities are done outside of the school system, because none are available to her at school.

The burden of all of the costs, transportation and arrangements is on us, as parents. But even more importantly, Grace is not with her school friends. She sees her all friends have the opportunity to participate but doesn't understand why she is not allowed to join. She wants to play soccer at Nolensville High School with her friends but has been denied. We know that inclusion early in life means inclusion later, which is paramount to Grace's ability to lead a productive, meaningful life in the long term.

Grace is hardworking, loyal and brings joy to all those who to get know her. Her presence at any club or

team would help teach other students how to work together with kids of all abilities and celebrate the smaller victories that don't always involve winning or losing. Schools just do not seem to have the resources or willingness to accommodate those with special needs in extra-curricular activities.

We have been told lack of resources at the school is the issue, which is unacceptable. Other students are not denied access to these activities for this reason, though surely some require extra help at times. It's as simple as having an extra hand – aide or teacher - available to support Grace, and others like here, in these activities.

Outside of the school system, Grace has excelled at dance and horseback riding by having a designated person to assist, to make sure she understands instructions and to keep her on task her during her session. This shouldn't be too much to ask. Our schools need funding to be allocated for these specific resources to support our kids so they can participate in extracurricular activities at their school, just like their "typical" peers.

Thank you for taking the time to learn about Grace. I know inclusion is important to you, and I look forward to helping make this happen.

# My Story

**James Lampley**

Age 16

Parents: Robyn and John Lampley  
Dickson, TN



## My name is James, and this is my story.

I am in the 10th grade at Dickson County High School, and I run on the XC and Track teams. Go Cougars!

I am working on the Alternate Academic Diploma. I am learning math and reading and science and history. I study at my own level in regular classes. I like the other students - I learn a lot from them, also. Like how to work together, how to lift weights and how to use SnapChat.

I would not like being in a different class away from my friends.

Thank you for laws that open doors for me. Please always keep me in mind for new laws.

# My story

**Josh Riley**

Age 24

Nashville, TN



## My name is Josh, and this is my story.

I'm Joshua Riley, I'm 24, and I'm from Nashville. I was diagnosed with autism and congenital spinal disease at the age of 19.

As an adult with several lifelong disabilities, the most difficult obstacle I've faced as of now is safe and affordable housing. Due to financial circumstances because of my disabilities and resources I already pay for, I've had to pull from personal funds along with my monthly disability payment to afford independent living.

Although I am lucky enough to have a safe living situation now, I have had to live in a halfway house where I was abused, apartment living situations with little or no support, and family model living situations in less safe areas of Nashville, solely because of my financial situation.

Even while I am blessed enough to have an apartment in the Bellevue area that I finally feel safe and supported in, I still struggle with paying

bills as I have been living on SSDI since Covid. I do receive funds from the ECF Choices program, but because I have chosen the Consumer Direction option in the program, none of my funds can be used for my housing expense.

Consumer Direction allows for the most independence, but also carries the most liability for me and my parents. Therefore, the majority of my budget sits unused while my parents must close the gap financially to provide my housing. If even just 15% of my ECF Choices budget could be used toward affordable housing, it would transform my experience, because a self-advocate that feels safe in his home, is volunteering, is employed, and moving toward independence will begin to rely less and less on government programs.

Thank you so much for your time and consideration.

# My Story

## Jovie Talbott

Age 16

Parents: Alecia & John Talbott  
Mt. Juliet, TN



## My name is Jovie, and this is my story.

I'm an autistic who has lived in Tennessee my entire life. Currently, I'm studying to become an entomologist or storyteller, and I'm hoping that one day I will be able to live off of my art.

I was in the Wilson County school system for most of my childhood, but right now, I'm currently attending a small private school in Madison. My school has a very different way of running things; there's not many kids and a good number of teachers are with us all day. Generally, being in this school has given me a better perspective on the school system in general. Today, I'd like to share some of my thoughts and experiences on the school system, as well as some possible solutions to issues I've faced while in it.

My experience in the public school system was that teachers are completely clueless when it comes to what to do with an autistic child. There would be times when I would be clearly stressed out and be pushed to keep working, despite making it clear I was unable to. I had daily meltdowns in school due to the teacher's unknowingness on how to help me. There were times when I separated myself from the class to calm down by running off to the bathroom, but I'd be brought back

to the room with the same teacher who was stressing me out. I had an IEP (also known as an Individualized Education Plan), which laid out specific exemptions and requirements I needed in school. Out of the many items on this list, I can only recall one thing being fulfilled: walking laps around the playground instead of walking for fifteen minutes. All of these issues culminated in an unhealthy learning environment where I was failing fifth grade. I had to go to juvenile court over refusing to give a book I was reading to a teacher, even though that was an accommodation laid out in my IEP.

I know for a fact that I'm not the only autistic kid who has had a difficult time in the public education system. Almost all of my current classmates are neurodivergent or disabled, and speaking to them has given me even more insight. I've heard about teachers ignoring blatant bullying that goes to physical abuse, locking kids in dark closets, kids doing plain addition up until fifth grade, then having to graduate.

All of these stories exist because of a major issue: all teachers are not given the resources and training they need to help teach disabled and neurodivergent children. I believe schools need to do better to ensure the quality

of life, education and mental stability for disabled and neurodivergent kids. This could be done through a variety of factors.

To start with, all classrooms could be equipped with at least one teacher's aide, or at least one aide to every two to three classrooms. This way, the teacher and said aide can split the work, and give every child more individual care and attention.

All schools should also be equipped with sensory equipment for kids, such as noise blocking earphones, fidget toys, and more than one sensory room for kids to go to when having meltdowns, or otherwise need a break/space separate from the class. These things could possibly help us focus better in school, along with giving us a calm-down space that isn't a bathroom stall.

Finally, teachers should be given proper resources (such as books and training) in order to know how to handle an autistic or neurodivergent kid.

So many issues many of us face on a day-to-day basis could be resolved just by teachers being better educated on things like what to do during a meltdown or what to do when a kid is misbehaving. Just flat out punishing children doesn't work - the mere existence of "problem children" proves that. Children - neurodivergent, disabled, or otherwise, need to understand exactly why something is wrong. And teachers need to know how to communicate that in a helpful and informative way - and they need to know how to properly help a kid having a meltdown aside from just chucking them in in-school suspension or detention and hoping for the best.

While these few changes wouldn't be cure-all-fix to the issues autistic kids face in school, I think that the possibility of these things being enforced and provided could potentially be of great assistance. Autistic people want to succeed, and I'm very sure that our legislators want us to as well. Please take what I said into consideration and thank you for your time.



# My story

## Keiston Flood

Age 12

Parent: Tamecka Strawther  
Hendersonville, TN



### My name is Keiston, and this is my story.

Keiston has Down syndrome and Autism. He attends Restoring Hope Christian Academy in Hendersonville, where he is in 4th grade. He enjoys adaptive sports like basketball, baseball, soccer, cheer and dance. Keiston also has ongoing medical problems that include chronic airway issues that mimic asthma, sleep apnea, tracheal mylasia, slight hearing loss in his right ear and feeding difficulties. He has therapy twice weekly for speech, fine motor development and behavior.

Raising a medically-complex child as a single parent means that employment is a tremendous struggle for me. I want and need to work but have not been able to get and keep a full-time job.

It is important to me that Keiston receive the education he deserves, which we just did not get in public schools, so he attends a private school in Hendersonville. We live in Gallatin, and it is a thirty-minute commute.

In the last two years, I have had to leave one job and was fired from two other jobs. I remain unemployed today. While I worked at the City of Gallatin for six years, I had to leave my job, simply because the new supervisor refused to be flexible with my start time (30 minutes), so that I could drive my son to his school in Hendersonville. I was dismissed from my job

at the Sumner County Board of Education because I had missed too many days, due to my son's medical issues.

I and many other single parents and families would greatly benefit if there were a special consideration for single parents who want to work but also have to sustain households. We don't want to have to depend on others - family, friends and the government - to feed, clothe and care for our children. While employers must provide extended medical leave time for employees, it does not extend to their children, which puts those of us raising children with special needs at a significant disadvantage in the work force and increases the stress we already have.

I have a Habitat for Humanity home that I cannot keep the mortgage up-to-date on, and I struggle with my car note and utilities just to get through the month. It's just hard. I am a good employee with a strong work ethic, but first and foremost, I am a mom. I just need some flexibility. If employers were required to give consideration and protection for me and those like me, I would not only be able to financially provide for my children but would also be a much better parent.

Thank you for hearing my story.

# My story

**Kyrsten Henderson**

Age 30

Franklin, TN



## My name is Kyrsten, and this is my story.

I am a 30-year old artist/filmmaker. I live in Franklin TN. My family and I have lived in several different states before we moved here.

I was diagnosed with autism when I was 3 years old. At first, my parents thought that I had a hearing problem. After a few visits to the doctor and some testing the doctor explained that I have autism. I didn't even know that I have autism until my parents explained this to me when I was a teenager.

The problem I faced as a young child was that I was trying to fit in or was trying to be like everybody else. I also had issues making friends and have had experiences with bullies. But that was the past, and I ended up learning that I can move on to a brighter future. I learned that I could create artworks, and also learned how to make a movie from a computer. I ended up calling myself an artist/filmmaker because

I make art and film at the same time. I have two college degrees. My first college degree was for art and filmmaking from Watkins College of Art and Design. My second college degree was for Media Arts of Animation.

I've learned how to be myself no matter what others say about me. I learned that I can't let autism define me. I learned that I do feel special, just for being myself.

And finally, I would like to thank my family for being there through good times and bad times. I have traveled a long road in my journey throughout life, and I look forward to the long road ahead.

Thank you for understanding me and hearing my stories.



# My story

## Lucas Williams

Age 4

Parents: *Duncan & Katie Williams*  
Clarksville, TN



### My name is Lucas, and this is my story.

We are the Williams Family, and we live in Clarksville Tennessee.

Lucas is 4 years old. He loves music, books, going to the grocery store, going to church and watching Peppa Pig. He also happens to have Trisomy 21 or as you may know it, Down Syndrome.

We envision a world where Lucas is not only included in and out of the classroom, but accepted and valued. A world where he is seen for who he is—the kind-hearted kid who loves music and Church, not for his disability. He deserves a world in which he has the same opportunities as his typically developing peers.

In order for our vision to become reality, inclusion and acceptance are vital. Inclusion matters. Not just for our son but for everyone. Everyone benefits. We believe Lucas' typically developing peers can learn just as much from him as he can learn from them, and research supports this! The more Lucas and others with disabilities are included and accepted, the less they are seen as being different. At school, in the community, and in the work place, people with disabilities of all kinds have so much to offer.

After Lucas was born, organizations such as the Tennessee Early Intervention System, the Down Syndrome Association of Middle Tennessee and Gigi's Playhouse were instrumental in assisting us with Lucas' needs and being a strong support for our family. Most recently, the Katie Beckett Waiver has been a significant financial aid for therapies, specialist visits and more that our health insurance does not cover.

For our family, other families, and future families who have children with disabilities, we ask that state programs continue to be funded and even expanded as they provide invaluable resources to so many.

It is our hope that community leaders and law makers see the worth of this wonderful part of our population and not only recognize their value but strive to celebrate it.

Thank you!

# My story

**Nora Freeman**

Age 24

Nashville, TN



## My name is Nora, and this is my story.

I am 24-years old, use they/them pronouns and have lived in Nashville since graduating from Vanderbilt University in 2019. I have been known as a teacher all my life--from teaching as a certified teacher as an adult and student teaching to co-teaching throughout high school and college. I taught kiddos all the way from six weeks old through 8th grade. I taught with Metro Nashville Public schools for two years before receiving my life-changing diagnoses. I now create art whenever I possibly can and co-teach an after-school art club with Turnip Green two hours a week. Mostly, I am just doing my best to live.

This past year has been a whirlwind for a lot of people, and it certainly has been for me. Last school year I was teaching kindergarten when I was diagnosed with ADHD. I definitely have ADHD, but that never really felt like the "whole picture." Throughout the year, I was learning and discovering that not only do I have Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), but I'm also autistic, which is actually not

that uncommon. ADHD and autism are what is called comorbid diagnoses, meaning both diagnoses commonly overlap so a lot of people will have both ADHD and autism. It's kind of like a Venn diagram of neurodivergence.

I have been dealing with a lot of issues surrounding functional living. Because I struggle to even work 2 hours a week, I don't have a stable income, am 77% of the way through the 7+ month waiting period for Social Security, I don't have health insurance and have been denied TennCare because I don't have Social Security. There is nothing more that I can do to fix the ways my disabilities impede on my daily living, but there is something you can do to help people who are really struggling like me.

First, it's hard and really overwhelming to be diagnosed with multiple lifetime disabilities, not be able to work, not have health insurance and not know what to do to get help. There isn't anywhere to go to get accessible help with all these things. It would be extremely beneficial to have one place autistic and otherwise disabled people can go to get support through all of these application processes and assisting with other support needs. Second, since July, there hasn't been a single application for Section 8 Housing. Third, SSDI benefits are not a livable amount/wage, and there needs to be something in place while applicants are waiting half a year to find out if they were even approved or not. We are people, too, and we need to receive the support and respect we truly deserve.

Thank you for listening to my story. I implore you to listen to what autistic adults have to say, because really, we are the only first-hand sources of autistic experiences. Thank you for showing compassion and understanding as you work to improve the resources accessible to disabled adults who are really struggling like me.

# My story

## Sharmane Pearson

Age 48

Parents: Joseph & Vivian Rinaldo  
Nashville, TN



### My name is Sharmane, and this is my story.

My name is Sharmane Pearson, I have Down Syndrome, and I am 48 years old. I have lived in Nashville for 18 years, and I am very active.

- 1) I work at Aaron's Furniture on Nolensville Road;
- 2) I participate in the Metro Parks disABILITIES Program;
- 3) I compete in Special Olympics; and I have been to World Games, and I will be going to Nationals in June;
- 4) I participate in Best Buddies;
- 5) I volunteer for the Down Syndrome Association of Middle Tennessee; and
- 6) I have been a self-advocate for many years.

My Dad and I have traveled to Washington D.C. to meet with legislators and talk about the needs of the Down Syndrome community.

I live with my Mom and Dad, who both work, and this is the reason I want to talk about a problem I have that I know lots of people with disabilities also have: transportation.

When my parents can't take me somewhere, I take the AccessRide buses; they are part of the Metro Transportation system. The problem is that there aren't enough buses, and there aren't enough drivers. Drivers are often late or don't show up at all. Sometimes I'm on the bus longer than I'm involved in the activity I'm actually going to on the bus. This is a problem.

AccessRide also uses cabs because they don't have enough buses, but because I've had several bad experiences with cabs, my parents don't want me to use them anymore. I don't want to, either.

One time I was scared when a cab driver left me alone in the cab to get out and say his prayers. Another time a cab driver left me alone in the cab to go shopping at Target. Both of these things happened at night in the dark and put me in a vulnerable, unsafe, and uncomfortable situation.

I know that I'm not the only one who has had these problems, because I've talked to my friends about them.

Because I'm sometimes late to work, my employers have had to be very understanding about my bus schedules. I'm lucky they have been. Not all employers are.

Please ask your fellow legislators to support funding for more buses and more, better-trained drivers. This will help folks like me to be working, happy, tax-paying citizens, and it will also allow me to be social and participate in community events. I'd be happy to share my story with you and anyone else who can help us get this done.

Thank you for listening. I know you can help us get the funding we so desperately need to be full members of society.

# My Story

**Will McMillan**

Age 33

Parents: Tom and Elise McMillan  
Nashville, TN



## My name is Will, and this is my story.

I am from Nashville, Tennessee. I am a self-advocate. I like reading for fun, and like spending time with my friends. I have voted in every election. I am a graduate of Pope John Paul II High School and Next Steps at Vanderbilt. I work at the District Attorney's Office.

I began walking more during the pandemic, but there are many areas where there aren't good sidewalks. It's hard to find safe places to walk. In my neighborhood where my apartment is and where my family's home is, there aren't many sidewalks. Another issue, depending on the time of day is crime.

I even found studies that show that people who live in neighborhoods with good places to walk are healthier because everyone would benefit from being a little more active- but it is especially important for those of us with Down syndrome. Without these safe places, people also must depend more on help from police, and they are already stretched very thin.

For many reasons, we should all focus on this idea of walkability. If roads are being repaired in an area, why not add sidewalks that are accessible? If companies are building new buildings, why not require them to add sidewalks that are accessible? That would help everyone. It would also be good for everyone to be more aware of their surroundings and to take classes like self-defense classes. We need to make Nashville a safer place for everyone.

Thank you for taking the time to learn about me. I'm happy to follow up and answer any questions you have. I'm also happy to provide any resources. Next time you are in my neighborhood, come take a walk with me.

# Notes

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Thank you!



[somethingextra.org](http://somethingextra.org)



[autismtn.org](http://autismtn.org)

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Tennessee Disability Coalition.

