

'Team Drew' Helps Student Transition Smoothly into Adulthood

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If you walk into the Planet Fitness in Meridian Mall near Lansing on any given day, you'll see row upon row of gym members perched on dark fuchsia workout machines, listening to music or watching TV as they work up a sweat.

Above the hum of the machines and fans, you'll start to pick up on a distinct voice resonating from one side of the gym. No one is bothered or alarmed. They know it's just Drew Choma, a gym employee who makes low noises as he removes used towels from exercise stations and replaces them with clean ones.



He moves on to wiping down the chairs, tables, and windows in the lobby. He replaced the towels on his own, but these other tasks require a little more guidance from his paraprofessional, Denise Applegate.

Drew, who has an autism spectrum disorder (ASD), is mostly nonverbal. But this has no bearing on the fact that he plays a key role in keeping the gym clean and orderly.

"I always say that if I could have ten more employees like Drew, I'd be happy," says Vickie Jackson, Drew's manager.

Drew was diagnosed with ASD at age four. Like any other parents, Janelle and David Choma weren't sure what kind of life he would lead or what his abilities would be. As he grew older, they doubted he would be able to have a job or sit in class for more than ten minutes. But with guidance from his peers in high school, Drew developed the patience needed to sit in an hour-long class. He attended prom and walked with his classmates at graduation. And now, at 22, Drew works two hours a day at Planet Fitness, several days a week.

If you take a snapshot of Drew right now, he is a picture of success—but getting here has involved some hard work. Over the years, a comprehensive team, including family, peers, school support staff, and community partners, has supported the development of his abilities and helped him get to where he is today. And each day brings a new challenge, especially as he transitions from school supports to community supports.

Support at Home

When Janelle received Drew's ASD diagnosis, she says her first instinct was to try to "fix" her son. He had to go to therapy. He had to be ready for kindergarten. But when the time came to enroll in kindergarten, Janelle realized she needed to stop waiting for Drew to "be ready." She couldn't cure ASD, but she could learn to work with it and appreciate Drew's strengths.

That was when the Chomas decided to put pen to paper, spelling out the life they envisioned for their son. They wanted him to be able to participate in family activities. They saw him being independent.

"We wanted him to be a valued member of his community, to be known," says Janelle. "Putting him in a special classroom or school wasn't going to allow him to be known."

The Chomas wanted Drew to be in a general education setting as much as possible, so they reached out to START to learn more about ASD. START helped them work with the staff at Drew's school to implement evidence-based practices proven to be successful for students with ASD.

START staff supported the Chomas by creating an extensive plan to make their vision for Drew a reality. Drew's older brother, Dominic Choma, 24, says he didn't fully grasp how ASD affects Drew until they were both teenagers. It seemed odd to him that so much focus was placed on Drew's disability. Teachers would ask him how he felt having "a brother with ASD."

"It wasn't something I was really concerned with," says Dominic. "He's just always been my brother. He's never really been that different to me."

Peer Supports

The Chomas' determination to have Drew included in general education classes gave Drew the opportunity to become friends with kids his age, like Johnny Wenzel.

Johnny remembers Drew coming in to his fourth grade class for the first time. Drew flapped his hands and didn't really talk, aside from making noises or echoing phrases he heard. Johnny also remembers Janelle coming in to talk to the class about ASD and how to communicate with Drew.

"I was just interested in this kid who seemed to act differently than everyone else," says Johnny, who had been seated next to Drew. "I was curious as to why he would say the things he did or do the things he would do, like flapping his hands. I started to spend a little more time with him because I liked being around him. I wanted to know more about him."

Johnny played with Drew during recess and the two occasionally sat together at lunch, but they didn't really form a close bond until Wenzel joined the high school's new LINK

program in his junior year. The LINK program, a START initiative that is implemented in schools throughout Michigan, provides an opportunity for students with ASD to interact with their general education peers throughout the day. Students in the program are referred to as LINKs.

"That's where it all kind of started to click for Drew," says Lisa Basore, who was a teacher consultant at the time and worked with Drew. "He was learning to self-manage many of his behaviors. It was all, in my opinion, due to his experiences with other students and peer supports."

Denise, who supports Drew at Planet Fitness, agrees. Students benefit greatly from paraprofessional support, she says, "but the peers are the ones who can make the true difference."

One LINK assignment involved students and their peers going on an outing outside of school, says Johnny. But after the initial outing, he and Drew ended up regularly playing laser tag, going to see movies, and eating meals together. Today, they see each other often and are planning to have Drew try an overnight stay at Johnny's apartment.

Maggie Whaley, who now works at a center-based school in Ottawa County, was initially friends with Dominic, Drew's brother. She and Drew became closer friends when she joined the LINK program in high school. She remembers the first time she stopped by the Chomas' house, specifically to spend time with Drew.

"The first time I showed up at his house to hang out with him, he was like, 'Whoa, I have a friend, too, and she's coming over to see *me*,'" says Maggie. "You could just tell it was a huge turning point in his life—and in my life, too."

David, Drew's father, says he was hesitant at first to let Drew go out alone with his friends.

"But they would come back, and everything had been successful," says David. "It surprised us, but after a while it was natural. If Maggie wanted to take Drew out, we'd let her. And Drew seemed to always enjoy those experiences."

Not only has the LINK program made a positive impact on Drew, but it also has provided an opportunity for educating members of the community about ASD. Many people are a little too accommodating with Drew, says Johnny. When Drew unintentionally cut in line at a McDonald's recently, one woman told them to go ahead. Although Johnny appreciated the woman's graciousness, he knew that, in the long run, it wouldn't help Drew to be allowed to cut in line. Johnny guided Drew to the back of the line.

"He has so many wonderful qualities, but he also has flaws, just like the rest of us. You love a person because of their flaws, and despite them," he says. "He needs to be

treated like everybody else, but there are still some situations where he needs to have a little more understanding.”

Theresa Whaley, a former LINK and Maggie’s sister, often takes Drew out for a meal and helps him do one of his favorite activities, recycling cans.

“Drew’s very bubbly,” says Theresa. “It’s hard to get him down....He always has a smile on his face, and he always seems to remember people who made even the tiniest bit of impact on his life, so that’s really great to see.”

‘Team Drew’

On a drizzly afternoon in February, nearly 15 family members, friends, current and former support staff, employers, and community agency representatives gathered in a small room to discuss Drew’s transition into adulthood. “Team Drew,” as Janelle has dubbed the group, had assembled to discuss a couple of questions that are crucial for a successful transition: Who is responsible for what in Drew’s life? How much can he navigate on his own?

The meeting, which lasted two hours, produced several ideas for how team members could work together to support Drew at work, at school, and in life.

“If we truly want to transition Drew into adult services, we’re going to have to get some of the adult agencies on board and help them get up to speed on how to support Drew,” says Maureen Ziegler, START’s autism education and intervention specialist.

Currently, the school district bears much of the load, says Maureen. But some responsibilities could now begin to transfer over to agencies like Community Mental Health and Michigan Rehabilitation Services.

Drew is a pioneer of sorts. When he first started school in a district in Ingham County a decade ago, the district was just starting to receive more and more students with ASD, says Mike Caine, the district’s special education administrator at the time. District staff began attending START trainings and learning strategies for supporting students in the general education setting.

“It’s been a process that there’s no blueprint for,” says Drew’s father David, adding that Drew’s team has helped make the process smoother. “That’s been the most rewarding part—and the challenging part as well—over the years.”

As Drew grew older, his family made a point to set goals for him and educate his classmates and teachers about ASD. Along the way, they also sought out school staff and peers who were committed to helping Drew succeed. Although some members of the team have graduated from high school or no longer work directly with Drew, they’ve stuck around. That’s not something you see often, says Amber Dale, a special education teacher and Drew’s new case manager.

“He definitely has a unique situation, in terms of the number of people involved from different agencies and aspects of Drew’s life, both past and present,” she says.

“Everybody works together so well. If one person doesn’t have the answer, somebody else at the table is going to have an idea.”

Drew’s team has helped him find employment and volunteer opportunities after high school. As he reached transition age, his LINKs began to brainstorm jobs he might enjoy. They knew that Drew is particular about cleanliness, so they helped him get a job in the district’s custodial department. He has since worked in a bus garage, at a dog groomer, and now, the perfect fit, Planet Fitness.

The meeting in February was the first time Drew’s former caseworker from Community Mental Health, Deb Sides, had seen the whole team come together. She had never seen a student’s employer participating on a team.

“This is the most impressive team of natural supports I’ve seen,” she said near the end of the meeting. “It’s really cool.”

What makes “Team Drew” work so well? A shared goal, says Lisa, the former teacher consultant who worked with Drew.

“We all really are working for the ultimate goal of doing what’s best for Drew, getting him where he needs to be,” she says. “That’s what I enjoy the most—just working with everybody and making the best choices for Drew. I think we’ve done a really good job of that.”

Drew’s team still has some tough questions to tackle, such as how he will make the switch from school to community supports, where he will live and who he will live with, and ultimately, how Drew’s robust supports can be replicated for other students with ASD or other disabilities.

As of 2013, 7,869 students with ASD in Michigan were transition age (14-26), according to the Michigan Department of Education, Office of Special Education. And as ASD diagnoses increase, that number will steadily rise each year.

“One of the real challenges for us as a district is that, once the numbers start to increase, it’s more and more difficult to really provide the depth and breadth of services and support we were able to give Drew,” says Mike, the former special education director in Drew’s district. “You really have to individualize, particularly when they start to get toward transition age. That takes a lot of resources.”

Life Moves Forward

Back at Planet Fitness, Drew cleans the large front windows, pausing occasionally to open the front door for members coming and going.

Gaining employment has been a powerful milestone for Drew, says Amber, the special education teacher.

“He’s a paid employee,” she says. “That’s a huge deal. He was able to put himself out there enough to where somebody could really see his skills and abilities and realize that this is an employable person.”

Vickie, Drew’s manager, says she would like to have someone give a presentation that will help everyone at Planet Fitness better communicate with Drew. But even without special training, Drew’s coworkers understand his needs and support him when necessary.

“Drew takes a lot of pride in his job,” says Janelle, Drew’s mother. “He likes wearing his uniform. He can’t say, ‘I’m proud of myself.’ You can just see his body language and expression, and you can just tell that it makes him happy and gives him a sense of purpose.”

Drew has come a long way, but there are still highs and lows, good days and bad days. It helps that members of “Team Drew” understand his strengths and weaknesses and believe in him. When asked about Drew’s upcoming overnight stay with Johnny, everyone echoes the same refrain: Drew will be fine, but if he’s not, he can simply try again.

“In the beginning, it might not be perfect,” says Maggie. “But if we don’t try, we’ll never know. And if we don’t try more than once, we’ll never know. I think that would be amazing, and I think he’s capable.”

‘Team Drew’ Members

- Janelle Choma, mother
- David Choma, father
- Dominic Choma, older brother
- Johnny Wenzel, friend and former LINK
- Theresa Whaley, paraprofessional and former LINK
- Maggie Whaley, friend and former LINK
- Vickie Jackson, Planet Fitness manager
- Denise Applegate, paraprofessional
- Liz Carter, friend and former LINK
- Lisa Basore, family friend and former teacher consultant
- Amber Dale, special education teacher
- Mike Caine, former special education director
- Deb Sides, former Community Mental Health caseworker
- Maureen Ziegler, START autism education and intervention specialist