

“I was overwhelmed. I felt lost. Where do we go? What do we do?” Teresa Marshall recalls about finding out her son, Ryan, had autism. At the time, Ryan was 4 years old and his parents, Teresa and Steve, both felt this initial worry and confusion, particularly about navigating special education services. Their daughter, Ashley, had always achieved highly in school and therefore they had no experience with the system of services they now needed for Ryan. Ryan’s parents remember that it was easier to find services for their son in early elementary school but as he moved into middle and high school, they quickly learned that they would need to become advocates to ensure Ryan received needed resources. All the while, the Marshalls worried about Ryan finding his place in the world. As parents, they wanted him to have opportunities to reach his potential and to thrive.

When Ryan reached high school, Teresa and Steve continued to advocate for the needs of their son. They especially wanted Ryan to find community at school, because he was in a separate classroom from many of his peers. Eventually, they learned that Ryan had an interest in swimming and signed him up for swim lessons. Ryan quickly excelled and began practicing with the high school swim team, which he enjoyed. Ryan wanted to swim more, but his high school did not participate in the Special Olympics. Used to advocating for their son, Teresa and Steve came up with a plan. With Steve as the swimming coach, and a group of other parents on board, the Marshalls created a Special Olympics swim team. In 2010, Ryan competed at the National Special Olympics Games and won two gold medals. Ryan’s participation and passion for swimming created a community for Ryan and his peers with disabilities. Ryan and the Marshalls finally found a place to belong - in the pool.

Amidst Ryan’s swimming achievements and new community, graduation approached, and the Marshalls were unsure what would come next for Ryan. Again, they wanted to find a place where Ryan would belong and where he could expand his communication skills. They wanted Ryan to be able to work and live independently. They went on a campus visit to the IDEAL Program at Lipscomb University in Nashville, TN, a postsecondary program designed for students with developmental disabilities. When they got to campus, they knew this was the community for Ryan.

Now at Lipscomb, Ryan takes classes and completes internships each semester. He practices communicating with employers and develops job and life skills. Ryan is able to attend this post-secondary program with help from Tennessee’s Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) program. Among other services, VR provides Ryan with transportation to and from school which is essential since he lives roughly 45 minutes from the campus. This past fall, the Marshalls were informed that, because of a change in policy, VR would no longer provide transportation. Without transportation, Ryan would not be able to attend the



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program. Ryan's parents did not agree with the change and, accustomed to advocating for their son, Ryan's parents contacted Disability Rights Tennessee (DRT). Through an Administrative Review process, DRT supported the Marshalls and were able to secure transportation for their son again.

Ryan graduates this spring and the memory of feeling overwhelmed and lost is a distant one for his parents. Teresa and Steve share about Ryan's growth, "Maturity, independence, confidence. We see him growing in so many ways." The Marshalls are no longer worried about whether Ryan will be able to work, but where he will. Through his internships Ryan has learned job skills that will make him an asset to whichever employer is lucky enough to hire him.