

I've come to talk to you today about the ineffectiveness of secondary schools in preparing students with disabilities for college, and work. In high school, through a career education class, I was led to believe that as a blind person I could be a DJ, TTY operator, or a customer service representative. In all of my ARD meetings over the years, I was never given any sort of guidance as to career options that were available to me, and an effective transition plan was never put into place. I was simply told that when I turned 16, we had to write a transition plan...there was no real thought put into who I was as a person, what my interests were, or what opportunities could be made available to assist me in getting a job once I graduated.

I graduated in May 2007 from TSBVI and McCallum, with no real knowledge of job coaching or how to prepare for college, my family and I pretty much figured it all out on our own. It was difficult and at times I believed there was little hope of being successful as a blind person. So, I did what any other person with a disability typically does, I turned to SSI for income (hand out).

However, I did have one lucky card in my pocket. It came to me back in September 2006 when the National Federation of the Blind (NFB) reached out to various Schools for the Blind across the country to see if they would send a student representative from their campus to attend a four day leadership seminar. Fortunately, the superintendent at the Texas School allowed me to go.

At the NFB, I met blind people who were living and working just like sighted people. I met some lawyers, a NASA engineer at the Goddard Space Center, and persons appointed to a committee by President Bush at the White House and Stacy Cervenka, who worked for Senator Brownback. It wasn't until then, that I truly realized my potential as a blind person.

However, once I returned to school in Texas I found it difficult to exert myself. Many staff, who worked at my schools, didn't really believe in the things I learned from people at the NFB. For example, I was told by my O&M Instructor, "If you are dating a blind person, you may as well dump him because you will not be successful unless you are with a sighted person". I told an Assistant Principal I wanted to be a lawyer, she responded, "Well Chelsea, going to school to be a lawyer takes a long time and I'm not sure you'd be willing to do that". An economics instructor told me, "You don't have to give the power point presentation to the class...you can just do an outline and turn it in to me". Even a guidance counselor once told me, "People will lose respect for you if you tell them you want to be a lawyer".

With all the great inspiration I received in public school, I decided to go ahead and graduate a year earlier than originally planned. My family and I believed that I would get better results from a NFB training center than in public school. So I moved to Louisiana, left my family behind, and learned the skills to be self sufficient. I now have the confidence and competence to succeed. I am currently working with DARS to get the equipment I need to ensure my success at ACC this fall.

I am grateful for the friends and mentors I met through the NFB. They have helped me rise above the fog in the public school system. I wish public schools would be willing to actually partner with successful organizations such as the NFB, who live, breathe and work in the life of a person with disabilities. It's possible that the educational system could learn something too!

What we, as people with disabilities sometimes need is a *hand up*, not a hand out! We too can be productive, tax paying citizens, living a fulfilling life, when afforded the right opportunities.