

David is busy



He works the lunch shift at Culvers, volunteers at Art Start, takes care of chores at home, practices his food prep skills, and hangs out with friends. He independently gets to his job and where he volunteers by taking transit or walking. David wants more, though, and would like to focus his efforts on advocacy and combining two of his other passions: food and art. “Food is an art. Food has a rainbow to it...Art is beautiful.” While David likes his job busing tables at Culvers, his goal is to move up in the company to be in the kitchen cooking and doing food prep. He needs to increase his skills and speed to make this move, so David, with the support of his team at Headwaters Inc., is exploring a volunteer opportunity at Meals on Wheels where he will work in the kitchen to help prepare the meals. In this environment and through activities at Headwaters, he aims to strengthen his skills so that he can move up at Culvers.

During high school, David took regular education classes and helped with the football team. His family advocated for this inclusion, and his mom attributes his ambition as an adult to the strong teachers in his life and his educational opportunities. After high school, though, there were few community-based options for services. For the next 20 years, he worked full-time in production at the prevocational facility at Headwaters, Inc. About 5 years ago, at a team meeting David was asked if he was interested in working in the community rather than in the facility. His family had noticed that things had become stagnant for David at the facility and they supported a change. David too was interested, so over the next year, he began to participate in more of Headwaters’ community-based day services, which offered a variety of community activities he could try out. His case manager at Headwaters Katherine Garrison, now manager of residential, day services, and community employment, talked with David’s family about the benefits of working in the community and the safety supports that exist. David began spending more time exploring his interests in the community using day supports and less in production. As his advocacy skills grew, he led this transition into the community. And once he discovered just a few of the many opportunities available to him in the community, he didn’t look back.

Part of David’s day services included participating in the Jump! Start program at Nicolet College. Jump! Start is a postsecondary college program for people with all abilities. Nicolet College partners with Headwaters and local school districts to provide access to college coursework, individual goal setting, and self-determination and self-advocacy skill development. Since David was interested in cooking, he took continuing education, summer cooking classes and volunteered at the college’s “Grab and Go” food market. He learned more about his rights and how to advocate for himself.

David soon put these newly strengthened self-advocacy skills to use. He got a job at a small restaurant in town, but when the owner sold the business, the entire staff was replaced. David moved on to his current job at Culvers. Because he had learned more about his support needs and goals for his job, he advocated for a new coach who could support this job growth. He worked with his case manager to hire a new coach whose style matched his goals. David felt empowered advocating for himself.

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“It feels good. I wanted to get it off my chest,” he reflects.

As David’s services became more individualized and community-based, David and staff learned about his interests and goals. By spending more time in the community, they all began to see his potential. Katherine guides her staff to consider the learning opportunities available in the community: “How can you take these times of going out and turn them into Discovery, learning, identifying goals and interests?” Tammy, David’s job coach agrees, “Like David, if we hadn’t been in the community, we wouldn’t have had the opportunity to identify what he’s into. Would he have ever known that he wanted to come here (to Art Start)? Just being in the community invites opportunities for what they like to do or what they might not even know they like.” While on a small group visit to Art Start to learn about the organization, David picked up a pamphlet and expressed interest in volunteering there. He began volunteering weekly, and then, without staff knowing it, he signed up for more hours to help at events on the weekends, outside of his time with Headwaters.

David’s family could not be more proud of him. He helps out around the house by grocery shopping, helping with meals, taking care of the animals and doing his own laundry. He’s connected to his community, getting coffee every morning from a local coffee shop and being greeted regularly by passersby. David’s strong advocacy skills have also benefited others. He’s presented at conferences and his dad notes, “He’s helping a lot of people. He thinks about others and is very compassionate.” David’s parents believe parenting is a tough job and that sometimes parents need to do things differently than how they were raised. “You got to let them go learn and experience and immerse themselves [in the community]. You can’t put them in a shelter...You got to get them out and expose them to people and learn social skills.”



David’s life has changed greatly in the last 4 years. He’s become a more self-determined person who knows what he wants and needs and how to advocate for himself. When asked to consider how this journey has changed him, David says, “I need more freedom. It’s freedom. Freedom....to explore for job, for kitchen, for Meals on Wheels...here and there. Combined my work skills.” David decided to come to day services because he wanted to challenge himself. “Well, I think, to step up. And say, you know, I’m not going to work back there anymore because, I’m free.” And David is free to work, to volunteer, and to advocate to build the life he wants as determined by him.

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