

## 2nd Place

Joseph Menter

### Triumphing through Adversity

Advocating for myself and others has been an important part of my life. I was born with Spina Bifida, a genetic birth defect affecting the spine and spinal cord. All persons with a disability face challenges that require extra effort to gain their independence. Therefore, advocating for yourself as a disabled person is crucial. As I develop my independence, I find it extremely rewarding to reach out and advance the rights of others.

As a youngster, I wore braces and faced surgeries that required working with medical and physical therapy specialists to learn how to manage my disability. This took teamwork to make sure we made decisions that were in my best interest.

At 13 years old, my mom passed away suddenly. The Child Protective Services worker found placement for me in two different foster care homes for approximately six months before my mom's best friend adopted me. This was an exceedingly tough time for me, and I relied on counselors and social services to get the support I needed.

In high school, I chose classes to help me learn independent living skills. Two of the classes that benefited me the most were business math and American sign language. They gave me the practical skills to manage my money and a way to reach out to communicate with those with another type of disability. I became a learner and a teacher as I practiced the signs and observed the interpreter work with a student. I still use sign language today to assist others and give them a voice.

Another way I advocated for my independence was by initiating a search for job training skills through my caseworker. This led me to a program at Michigan Rehabilitation Center (MRC) to practice job skills with on-the-job training in the community. These skills later transferred to a job at Buddy's Pizza which I held for a year. Now I collaborate with

a teacher at the local community college, Kalamazoo Valley Community College (KVCC), to provide computer support in various classes.

Developing these skills has allowed me to reach out to help others. My brother has ADHD and PICA. I have trained with his teachers and supervise his daily learning by following a behavioral plan.

Recently, I researched and chose a psychologist who can provide the best therapies for my anxiety and depression. A couple of weeks ago, my housemate was unresponsive. I had to call 911 and relay the information to the operator while my workers performed CPR. It was stressful but I remained calm. Through experiences such as these, I have come a long way in assertively speaking up for myself and others.

Helen Keller said, "Character cannot be developed in ease and quiet. Only through experience of trial and suffering can the soul be strengthened, ambition inspired, and success achieved." I have found this to be true in my life as well.