

Jenny Holden

No one ever asked me about person-centered planning before. I like having lots of people talk about my goals and how to reach them. At Mason LIFE, I make choices about electives, activities and goals. Before, teachers sometimes asked me to think about the future. But they didn't really include me in planning.

Dr. Graff encouraged me to make goals and speak up about them, and decide which were most important to me. At the first meeting, Dr. Graff spoke directly to me and asked me questions. That was new. I told Dr. Graff about personal goals, like keeping my head up and looking people in the eye. I also talked about important goals like staying on topic in class or for conversations. Also we talked about the future.

Dr. Graff had me create this notebook for working on one or two important goals outside of class. The first goal was starting conversations and keeping them going. This is important because I like talking with my family and friends, and taking part in class discussions. Dr. Graff had me find newspaper articles and read them. I had to come up with facts and questions to ask about the articles, and write them all down. When I finished an article, I gave the notebook to Dr. Graff. She reviewed it each time. I worked on it until the end of the year.

The meeting and the notebook made me feel great. I felt more independent. I could go to Dr. Graff and tell her my ideas and goals. This was important later, when GMU's student government came to meet with students in the LIFE program. They talked about getting involved in the school community. It sounded great. I wanted to speak up and advocate for my friends in the LIFE Program.

I wanted to join the student government. I had leadership training in high school, and liked public speaking. But I was worried about asking my Mom. I would have to stay late for student government meetings. I spoke with Dr. Graff. She called my Mom. I became the LIFE Program liaison to the student government. It is a big part of my program.

I present the LIFE program report to the student government each week. Last year, Dr. Graff wrote the reports. Now I write them. I go to a class called Special Topics Support, where I get to work on my report. Mrs. Lawal, an instructor, helps me edit it. I work on writing and typing, and speaking up and looking in people's eyes. And I have gotten to know lots of regular George Mason students.

Last year, I gave a report to the student government about the national campaign to ban the r-word because it is hurtful to people with intellectual disabilities. Two weeks later, the Student Government created a re-so-lu-tion banning the use of the r-word on campus. I couldn't believe it.

In other meetings, Dr. Graff and I chose different goals for me to work on outside class. One goal was sequencing. Dr. Graff would give me an activity, like buying a coke from a machine, and I would write down all the steps and give her the notebook back for review. Dr. Graff said this would help me learn not to leave out steps in telling or writing a story. Now I see it is important for community access class, when we read a map and plan a route.

I also learned to speak up more about what I like or don't like about jobs. Last year I had an office job on campus in Sodexo, the university food service.

It was mostly filing, but there was no one around except my job coach. He was great, but it wasn't what I wanted. I like working with people. I've worked as an assistant counselor and as a teacher's aide in Sunday school. I told Ms. Labbe, the head of the employment program. She helped me get a job in the GMU preschool. I helped kids on the playground and by rubbing their backs at rest time. I loved working there. I would like a job helping kids after I get out of school.

This summer my Mom and I met with Dr. Graff and Ms. Labbe because it is my senior year. This year employment goals are more important. I said I wanted to try some other kinds of jobs. Now I work Thursday afternoons at the front desk in the LIFE Program. I answer the phone and do office work. On Fridays I go downtown. I have a Capitol Hill internship. I work in two Congressmen's Offices. I help with typing, filing, and faxing and I am learning to help giving tours. It is great.

I am also working on independence goals. This year, I am living in the residence halls on campus. Sometimes it is hard to get homework, laundry and food shopping done. But I love living with my friends.

I will graduate later this year. There will be more meetings with my parents, Dr. Graff and others about finding a job. I have shadowed jobs at a bakery and a library. I am ready to keep planning for my future.