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Delaware schools: College-bound despite disability

UD's STEP effort offers teens possibilities

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Jessica Vale, 16, of Newark, has some fun with Annabelle, a therapy dog, Monday at Woodlawn Library in Wilmington. Vale, who is visually impaired, is attending University of Delaware's STEP program, which offers a taste of college life and the business world. (Special to The News Journal/EMILY VARISCO)

When Kevin Creedon, 16, thought about college his main concern wasn't what major to choose but whether he would be able to navigate the campus.

Creedon, a rising sophomore at Mount Pleasant High School in the Brandywine School District who is visually impaired, aspires to become a radio disc jockey. He was one of 12 students ages 16 through 21 attending this year's Summer Transition Education Program, or STEP, offered through the University of Delaware's Center for Disabilities Studies. The program is supported by the Division for the Visually Impaired. In its third year, the program had students living at the university this week, getting a taste of college life and the business world.

Program director Debbie Bain said this year's program includes the most externships with five of the students shadowing professionals such as a dog trainer, photographer and physical therapist. Bain said she hopes next year all students will be able to go on at least one externship.

The program is an opportunity to try different jobs in one week while improving communication skills and building connections, Bain said.

Jessica Vale, 16, of Newark said she likes everything about dogs, so choosing one program was difficult.

Throughout the program, she had the opportunity to shadow a dog trainer and go to the Woodlawn Library with the nonprofit Paws for People and Annabelle the dog to read aloud.



Vale said she enjoyed the program because of the opportunities. She noticed she preferred opportunities where she could use her work with dogs to help people and said she was interested in raising seeing-eye dogs because of her own visual impairment.

Jessica Vale holds Annabelle as she works with Deanna Pedicone of Newark (right), who works for the Center for Disability Studies at UD and volunteers with Paws for People, which helps children learn to read by reading to therapy dogs like Annabelle. (Special to The News Journal/EMILY VARISCO)



Jessica Vale, 16, who is visually impaired, hopes to attend college and learn to work with animals. Attending UD's STEP program gave her a chance to experience both of those goals. (Special to The News Journal/EMILY VARISCO)

One of four undergraduate University of Delaware students acting as coaches accompanied the STEP students on their externships.

All coaches have minors in disabilities studies and were living with the students in university dorms.

Program coach and rising UD senior Katie Biddle said the program was helpful in showing students everything they could accomplish.

"Their goals are more realistic than what they might have thought," Biddle said.

Biddle went with Creedon to his externship at the University of Delaware's radio station, WVUD. There, Ken Galvin, a volunteer DJ for the past 40 years, showed Creedon what to expect on the job.

Galvin is the only visually impaired DJ in the state of Delaware. He said his appreciation of music drives him to spend time planning and executing his Classic Rock Cafe.

Creedon and Galvin agreed music was good therapy for everyone, and both said they make adjustments to their lifestyles to compensate.

Although the station has its own music library, Galvin brings his own CDs, which are marked so he can recognize them by touch.

To compensate for his vision loss, Creedon wears glasses and, rather than read someone's expression through facial features, relies on how the person speaks.

"We have to use our ears all the time," Creedon said.

After spending an afternoon with Galvin, Creedon said he felt more confident after seeing someone else do what he wants to do.

He said he is considering attending UD and wants to volunteer with the university's radio station before graduating from high school.

"Now that I know what I'm doing when I get to college," Creedon said, "everything seems like it is going to be a little easier."

The program is successful because of its flexibility, Bain said.

"I plan and then it becomes whatever it becomes," Bain said. "Sometimes we are the teacher, sometimes we are the role model, sometimes we are the question-asker."

"They begin to balance things that are important to the student and things that are important for the student," Bain said.
