

transition specialists partner with students

TO TURN DREAMS INTO REALITY



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By Ann Flannery

Too often we saw our graduates coming back to school. They had tried to find a path to success. They had been ready to work hard. They had been ready to achieve. Again and again they had failed. Perhaps they were working but frustrated and angry about their jobs—never knowing where change was coming from or how to cope with it when it came. Perhaps they had been hired but quickly laid off. Perhaps they had been interviewed for jobs but had not been hired. Perhaps they had not even been interviewed. They returned to campus—the Idaho School for the Deaf and the Blind (ISDB)—to touch base with a place and a people who knew them, to reassure themselves of their own abilities and their own worthiness, to express their frustration with a system that did not seem to need or want them. In 2000, the Idaho Educational Services for the Deaf and the Blind (IESDB) responded.

The position of “transition specialist” was established. There was no model, no plan, no strategy. We plucked a coordinator, Paula Mason—one of our most dedicated high school teachers—from her classroom. The need was urgent; Mason would cover a state of 85,000 square miles, crisscrossed by more than 60,000 miles of road, attempting to serve young deaf and hard of hearing people in over 140 school districts and in private and charter schools.

Unintimidated, Mason—using an office on a nearby community college campus as her home base—met with individual deaf and hard of hearing young people

Right: Transition specialists provide students with supports they can utilize in their quest to find work after graduation.

Photos courtesy of Ann Flannery



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throughout the state. Her first goal was helping the students find summer employment. Most of them wanted to work while still in high school, and Mason was determined to find them jobs. In most cases she did.

When the students returned to school that fall, Mason continued to provide them with reminders that their time at ISDB would not be forever and suggestions about what they would do when the ties and supports they had known for so long vanished as they ventured out to make their way in their respective communities. Today, as students look for and obtain jobs, we see their lives as a “journey.” This program offers “itinerary choices,” “road signs,” and “travel tips” for our student travelers. These activities do not guarantee success, of course, but they do begin to level the playing field between deaf and hard of hearing youth and their hearing peers.

Idaho is one of the states in which often our youth cannot find work and our companies cannot find the trained employees they need. Whether the job is one of production and sales or development and service, the training demand does not seem to meet the trained supply. Mason was determined to change that, too.

By 2007, Mason was ushering her young sojourners into Idaho Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (IDVR) offices across the state, cultivating relationships with the vocational rehabilitation

(VR) counselors and state administrators along with her students. Slowly the VR counselors recognized the benefits of knowing that the steps their clients—our students—needed to take would be supported by a knowledgeable professional. As transition specialist, Mason did not duplicate services already offered; she was not behind a desk outlining the parameters of the statewide services designed to secure sustainable, gainful employment. Mason was on the ground—and usually running—to keep up with a young deaf traveler in search of his or her job. As our students learned that their transition specialist was part of their circle of support and aware of the unique challenges they might face, they willingly sketched out their own itinerary, chose their routes, and hurdled the obstacles they found in the road. These young travelers, with a seasoned “travel agent” at their side, were creative, full of energy, and not afraid.

Eventually, the IDVR agreed to partner with our school. The IESDB and the IDVR entered an interagency agreement that brought an additional transition specialist on board and deepened our collaboration with VR counselors across the state.

What began as a single individual finding summer jobs for kids became the foundation for a 12-year journey of building guide-on-the-side supports for youth across the state of Idaho. Mason was able to connect directly with individual high school students on our residential school campus and in schools across

our state. Leveraging the long-term connections fostered by our outreach program, Mason was able to identify transition-age students, discover their needs, and share the resources best suited to support their transition choices. Whether students are headed to a university, a post-secondary training program, or directly into employment, the IESDB transition supports can provide the information to empower their decisions and facilitate their next steps in achieving their dreams.

Cesar

Cesar was born in Mexico and attended public school in Idaho Falls until he reached middle school, when he transferred to the ISDB campus in Gooding. When his family relocated to

Colorado, Cesar transferred and eventually graduated from the Colorado School for the Deaf. Right after graduation, he secured a job working in a processing plant and earning a very substantial wage.

However, for Cesar money was not enough. He wanted to go to college. He was concerned about his

English writing skills, but he felt that college was where he belonged. Cesar reconnected with Mason, and the two began making plans for him to return to Idaho with the goal of attending the College of Southern Idaho in 2003.

Unfortunately this proved impossible when Cesar's placement test indicated that he must take his first classes at the pre-college level. This proved frustrating for our ambitious student. Two weeks into the second semester of his Adult Basic Education English class, Cesar announced he was "so bored!" It was clear that if he had to keep spinning his wheels in this class, Cesar might change his destination again. Both the student disability services director (me!) and Mason were unsure that Cesar really understood the length and challenge of the road before him.

Mason helped re-conceptualize his work: "A boring two-year college program" became "Are you willing to work toward your goal—a college degree?" Cesar and Mason were able to find an instructor of developmental English and a tutor. Cesar began to see progress and that fired up his motivation. He completed the development levels—English 025, English

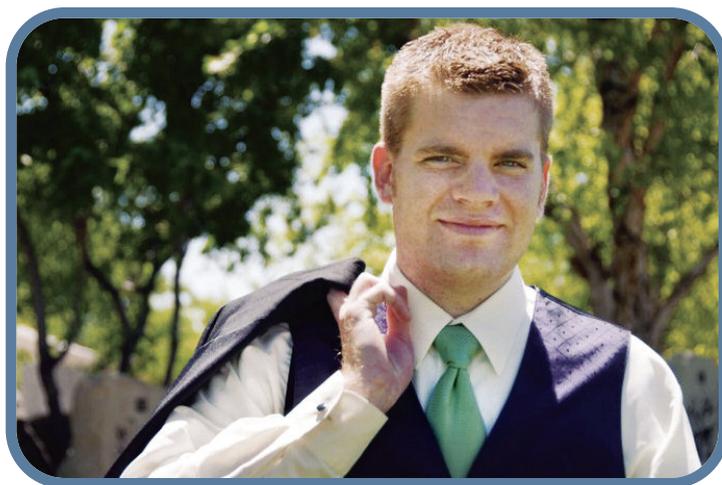
090—and moved into English 101 and then English 102. With each essay, Cesar felt his self-esteem and confidence build.

As transition specialist, Mason remained vigilant from the sidelines, always there to invite the team, including Cesar himself, to stitch together the needed supports and investigate the options, and Cesar found himself supported without ever losing the sense that he held his future in his own hands. By 2007, he had earned both his American citizenship and a degree in woodworking and cabinetry. Although Cesar has imagined himself a teacher someday, he is delighted to be transporting and installing granite in homes and businesses across the country.

Tim

Tim grew up in a very small town even by Idaho measure, using the same interpreter for 13 years. His parents were educators, and continuing his education beyond high school graduation was certainly expected. Even though the distance from his home to the College of Southern Idaho (CSI) was less than 150 miles, Tim's transition away from the familiar small town surroundings and into the unfamiliar college system and the urban flavor of his new home was more than he thought he could manage. His mother accompanied him to his new town of less than 40,000 residents and stayed in a local hotel for the first week. Before the end of the month, however, Tim was ready to quit college and head home.

Although Mason was not caught off guard, one might wonder how a transition plan so well constructed could unravel so quickly. Tim had met Mason during his junior year at his first transition Individualized Education Program meeting. From the moment he entered kindergarten, Tim knew he was college-bound, so the plan for his transition was simple: complete high school with all of the needed requirements, schedule college testing, apply for VR services, and develop an individual plan for employment. Once he enrolled, Tim would be ready to begin the conversation with the college about the needed accommodations.



TIM LEDINGTON

As Tim began to pack and head back home to the familiar, we circled the wagons! The word went out to all of his campus “touchstones” to increase the supports, empathy, and validation available to Tim. With her office on this community college campus, Mason had well-developed relationships with dormitory and CSI student services staff, instructors, and Tim’s family. Our transition specialist and the director of student disability services met with Tim, acknowledged his discomfort on campus, and invited him to remain engaged in his coursework and college activities until the end of the spring semester.

We bargained for time, feeling that if Tim would commit to stay until spring then we could build in the needed supports. Tim was encouraged to apply for the Ambassadors, a student service organization in which paid positions were offered to students who wanted to be of service to the campus community. The Ambassadors is a tight-knit group, with retreats, training, and frequent collaborations that might allow Tim to develop a sense of belonging that Tim’s family could not provide at a distance. Feeling isolated with the English-based signing he brought from his public school K-12 years, Tim enrolled in an American Sign Language (ASL) class and slowly made friends with students who shared his language, both deaf and hearing.

We began to see that the process was working. It was Tim who was willing to brave the challenge of being the college’s first deaf ambassador, and it was Tim who was willing to shelve his trusty way of communicating with others and try the “foreign” language of ASL. It was Tim who took on dorm life and roommates, group living, and an apartment on his own, and it was Tim who earned a degree in graphic design.

On the sidelines was the transition specialist who was there to recognize the potential danger that arrived with the initial onset of his homesickness. It was the transition specialist who knew what validation and supports were needed and who was able to weave, with Tim, these supports into his life.

Tim and the transition specialist would both build on these lessons as Tim continued his education. In fact, Tim went on to earn his associate’s degree in education and his bachelor’s degree in education. Today he is in graduate school at Idaho State University with the goal of eventually becoming a teacher of math for deaf high school students. Throughout his education, Tim has maintained the precious partnership with our IESDB transition specialists who helped him embark on his journey, continue through its unexpected hurdles, and without whom he may never have left the station.



CHELSEA NEWBERRY

Chelsea

Chelsea began and ended all of her K-12 education at our Gooding, Idaho, residential campus although she commuted from her home 35 miles southeast in Twin Falls. Precocious and fiercely independent from the beginning, Chelsea was always very social and quick to give her opinion on most issues. She graduated and, as everyone expected, headed to college.

Her least expensive and most supported option was the local community college while living at home and completing her general education core coursework. Chelsea planned to be a doctor. This type of academic and personal goal came with a prescribed set of steps: enroll in the required classes, stay at the top of the class, develop an academic prowess to stand the test of time, and save money.

At first glance, there wasn’t much for the guide-on-the-side to do—until Chelsea began her capricious crossing of the higher education and employment challenges that followed. Between her valedictorian address at high school graduation in 2005 and her associate’s degree in liberal arts in 2011, Chelsea gave six majors a try, collaborated with three VR counselors, lived in 17 residences, and secured and terminated 12 positions of employment. Even her major, liberal arts, said something about her internal struggle with where she was headed and how she might reach that destination. As Chelsea was insistently self-sufficient from childhood, Mason and the transition specialist who followed Mason realized that being there with choices, resources, cheerleading, and a hand to hold would be the most effective ways to meet Chelsea’s needs and style for engaging in transition support.

As she stepped into her Miss Deaf Idaho sash and crown the spring following her college graduation, she knew her platform would be, simply stated, “Successes and Failures: Redo!” Chelsea believed this focus to be a way to share her post-secondary experiences in all their glory, “splattered with failures that blossomed into successes,” because she chose to “redo.” Time and again throughout her reign, Chelsea offered youth in her own community and across our state her own personal mantras: the courage to try again, the patience to keep on chugging when things don’t go as planned, the wisdom to not make the same error again, and the ambition to finish what they start—and Chelsea has done just that. She is now a student at the University of Montana working on her bachelor’s degree in women’s and gender studies. Chelsea claims that a master’s degree is next on her list.