

JESSICA: Hi this is Jessica Murray, managing editor for Stairway to STEM, an online resource that supports autistic students transitioning to college, particularly in the STEM fields. This April, Stairway to STEM decided to kick off the “Steps to Autism Acceptance” podcast. We wanted to give our editorial board members a chance to promote concrete activities, the actions, that people could take to build, not just to awareness, but greater acceptance, for autistic students and students on the spectrum. What does it mean to really acceptance someone else as they are? Our editors, and their guests, are going to explore the steps we can take now to create meaningful change. Without further ado, I want to introduce, editorial board member, Theresa Revans-McMenimon.

THERESA: Hi Jessica, thank you for inviting me to talk about this exciting podcast on inclusive models on college campuses.

JESSICA: Listeners, are you unsure about what parents and family members can do to support high school students transition to college as well as to foster acceptance for emerging young adults in their academic communities? Theresa is going to help us address this problem. Theresa, in addition to working as an editorial board member for Stairway to STEM, what’s your primary role? And who’s going to be your guest for this episode?

THERESA: My primary role is a counselor for students on the autism spectrum at Westchester Community College here in New York. One of the main goals of my responsibilities is to help acclimate new students with ASD to the college community. I also serve as a liaison for the Pleasantville Lab School program, which is a “Think Model” program held at Westchester Community College. So, my guest today is actually going to be my husband, John McMenimon, who is also an educator and is a parent of one of the students who participates in the Lab School program. And we wanted to talk about the importance of this inclusive model on college campuses, what it means for the students, for their growth and success, and the benefits of having a program like this on community campuses.

JESSICA: Terrific, Theresa, this sounds incredible. Thank you so much for leading this episode, I'm really looking forward to it!

THERESA: Thank you, Jessica, for inviting me to this wonderful program. Today my guest is John McMenimon, and educator for the Yonkers Public Schools, as well as a parent to our eighteen year old son, participating in the Pleasantville Lab School. In today's discussion, we wanted to focus on the importance of inclusion and the benefits of the "Think College" model and programs such as the Pleasantville Lab School. First, I would like to give a brief overview of the Pleasantville Lab School program.

The Pleasantville Lab School at Westchester Community College, designed for students eighteen to twenty-one years of age with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities, operates under the Pleasantville School District. It affords social, educational, and vocational opportunities with same-age peers. The program is designed to teach students skills and strategies in order to transition to adult life as independently as possible. Classes are provided in partnership with the Pleasantville Lab School, Westchester Community College, and the Division of Workforce Development and Community Education at WCC. The basic framework of the Pleasantville Lab School is on the same college model, which includes inclusive college classes enrollment, access to campus career services, a work experience on campus, and spending time on campus with college peers.

Through this "Think College" model, students are able to participate in self-determination and self-advocacy, there are engagements with family and partnerships in the community, and students are advised on their course of study, enrollment, and preparing for future success. So, John, as an educator, what have been your experiences with inclusion? And what are the benefits to all students?

JOHN: Well, as a teacher of thirty years, I've had several opportunities to teach inclusion classes. I'm a seventh-grade history teacher and, in the Yonkers school system, we have some classes that have been included into the mainstream courses. In cooperation with working with

their special-ed teacher, I have found that modifying how I teach, modifying my tests, my notes, even the whole process of how I teach, for example: providing more wait time between questions and answers, repeating or refining questions, checking for understanding as the lesson goes on, just to make sure that everyone is on the same page, and providing more visuals such as outlining the lesson on the front board, or providing graphic organizers, etc.

THERESA: So what you're really talking about here is universal design for learning (UDL).

JOHN: Yeah. Yes, yes, it is. I found that it was very helpful to the inclusion students, but to be honest, also excellent for my regular students. In that, obviously we all know that there are different methods of learning, and the students found that the visuals helped to kind of pull the material all together. So, it was definitely helpful for all the students.

THERESA: So, as a parent, and you know I'm going to chime in here, what is the desire for our son, Joey, in regards to inclusion?

JOHN: Well obviously, I mean both of us are big proponents of the least restrictive environment. We wanted to give Joe as much freedom and opportunity to live life as normally as possible. So, therefore, by going to events, you know church, restaurant, shopping etc., we wanted Joe to live as normal and as a fulfilling life as possible. Obviously, there were some moments, when he was younger, where transitioning was a little bit more difficult, but I think by providing those opportunities, it allowed him to grow, it allowed him to adapt, and I think it was better in the long run for him.

THERESA: You know, I think back to some of the early advice we had, as we started down this road together, and one of the psychologists had suggested to us that we develop a routine, and it's the same routine from a day-to-day basis and that was going to be helpful for him. But when we thought about and reflected on it, you know, our attitude was, "Well, the world doesn't work that way." It's not routine, it changes from day to day. So, we kind of put that advice aside and then focused on trying to add more spontaneity to help encourage flexibility.

You know, if the ultimate goal, for any individual, is to be a functioning member of society and to live in the community, then what you do is expose the individual to community living. And that really has been, with inclusion, and with the “Think” model program, we are exposing him to community colleges and community living—to how peer-age students go to school. So, when we think about the “Think” college model, what comes to mind?

JOHN: Well, I think by providing Joe the opportunity on a college campus, to learn at a college level, to experience the normal day to day college life that his brother or that his fellow students enjoy, the freedom to go about the campus, heading to the gym to go swimming in the pool, the freedom to go into the cafeteria, the freedom to select a wide variety of classes, I think all of it has been wonderful for Joe in that allowing him to open up more and to enjoy that opportunity, that freedom.

THERESA: And I hear the chuckle in your voice when you mention “even the cafeteria” because not only does he have a wide variety of course offerings, but he has a wide variety of food to choose from that he was not getting at the high school.

JOHN: Yes. [laughing]

THERESA: So, and that’s something that he has enjoyed. So, let’s talk a little bit about his experiences growing up, in terms of going to an elementary to high school and then transitioning to the current program. I mean we initially started with main-streaming classes where he went from self-contained to participating in classes with other students. Then when he moved on to high school, it was a little reflective of the same thing with this hybrid program. But the high school, he participated in some of the electives, but there was a need for change, what was that need for change?

JOHN: Well, I think as the four years went on, Joe had taken several regents courses, but we ran into a problem: that eventually he exhausted all the electives. He had taken art, music, computer science, and after a while the school had no more to offer him. So, when we transitioned him to the Pleasantville Lab School, it really opened up opportunities that he could

sit down with his teacher and select from hundreds of courses. Likewise, the work experience at the internship and again just that general college experience was so much more enjoyable for Joe compared to a high school level.

THERESA: I recall some of the anxiety that we were experiencing, as his parents, in the earlier high school years when you start thinking, okay high school, it's four years but four years goes by very quickly. And what's going to happen when he turns eighteen? What's going to be the next step? And I find that the "Think College" model, his participation in the Pleasantville Lab School, has eased some of my anxiety.

I don't want to speak for you, but it has enabled him to have exposure to more variety of not just the course offerings but different types of jobs. So when he was in high school, and he had some work experience as part of the program, it was choice of three. Did you want to do a little retail? Did you want to go to the supermarket? Or did you want to help out at a childcare center, serving juice for the small kids? But here, in a "Think College" model, it's, what are your strengths? What are your skills? What are the courses that we have? So, if you like art, are you interested in maybe computer animation, or 2D design? Or, you have an interest in criminal justice, because he took the criminal justice course when he was in high school, so he was now afforded an opportunity to help out in a security office. So, it's really about opening up doors and creating a variety of experiences.

JOHN: I'll say, speaking with several other parents of my current students, the students with the IEPs, who are having difficulty in the gifted program, to speak to them about the opportunities that a program like the Lab School would offer and that to try to give whatever advice I can as a parent on the transitioning. So many of my students, again they're seventh graders, that I now have a few years' experience dealing with the high school and a college-aged child as opposed to the junior high, to try to give whatever advice- because it is kind of nerve racking as a parent. Your child has their own nervousness about transitioning to a new school regularly. But it's something where, as a parent, you want them to be safe, happy, and healthy. And it was really

nice, the support we got, from the Lab School. Joe, when he first began back in August, he was shy, he was nervous about it. And yet, within a few weeks, he had clearly opened up and was enjoying it. I remember we spoke, just a few weeks ago, about what did he enjoy most about the college and he said just the freedom to go about the campus. Again, if he wanted to go to the gym to go swimming in the pool, or if he wanted to go to the cafeteria. Again, that freedom that he didn't have back in junior high or high school.

THERESA: Not only that, it's also freedom that he sees others have. So, "if my brothers have this, why can't I have it?" And you shouldn't be treated any differently just because you have a disability. Which, again, is really part of what inclusion is. And programs like the "Think College" model really focus on neurodiversity. So, it allows for that inclusiveness, in that, "okay, we are very different on a neurological level, and we will respect that." John, as a parent, what were the areas that you were most afraid of as Joe was transitioning to the Lab School program?

JOHN: Well, the high school he had attended was a rather small school, the entire district was less than a thousand students. And then he suddenly transitioned to Westchester Community College, which was a campus of fifteen thousand people. So, I was worried about the size factor. I was worried that, maybe he would somehow get lost on campus. But also, Joe is shy to begin with. How would he fit in? How would he adapt to the changing environment, because he had spent four years at the high school, so he had achieved a comfort level. Again, when he had started at the Lab School, back in August, he was shy in the beginning. But I think as he became more comfortable, he enjoyed the program more. How about you, what did you feel?

THERESA: I think I was anxious about the size of the building. I do work there, so that gives me a little bit of comfort, but, at the same time, this entire academic year that he has been there, I've may have bumped into him on campus once, maybe twice. So, it really was navigating the campus in terms of the size. The Lab School and "Think College" model program does allow for peer mentors, so I knew he wasn't going to be alone. But, it's also about feeling lonely, because you can still feel lonely in a crowd.

So, when you start a program, and he went to this transitions program not knowing anybody, then he would have to start from scratch in terms of overcoming his shyness again and to learn to make friends and fit in. The wonderful part about the model program is that it does incorporate a lot of social experiences for the students. So, he is given opportunity, one-on-one and in a small group setting, to make friends. Then, during other parts of the day, he is attending a college class that's going to have thirty students in it. So, it really was an adjustment to the size of the school, I would say, would be the biggest fear. In terms of travel training, that's incorporated as part of the campus. He has learned, over the course of this year, to use public transportation here in our county, because that is part of the independent living schools that the program teaches. But again, it's about size, it's about adjustment, and I think as a parent, it's also about learning to start to let go and to allow your child to move out of a situation that can be a cocoon for them.

JOHN: To be honest, that's true of our two other sons as well. I think most parents I deal with, at the junior high level, they're in that process of trying to let go, and they're scared as their children are starting to reach adolescence. So, I think the transitioning from high school to college is just a later version of that. But, yes, it is that tough part as a parent to let go and hope that your child succeeds and that they do well at the new level.

THERESA: I mean, in the inclusive classes, one of the classes he's taking, this semester is called "College Success." Which is actually a very good transition class in itself. They do cover topics that adults need to be aware of such as sex education, safe sex, and drinking and driving. So, he is being exposed to, socially, struggles that most eighteen to twenty-one-year olds have, and yet his experiences are a little more removed. But this has started that thinking process along those roads, and we were able to have a conversation about safe sex the other night. I also think exposure to that peer-model program allows for that, as compared to a student who is participating in a self-contained classroom at the high school level, doesn't get that variety of lectures and experiences and discussions.

JOHN: Well, I think as you see more and more students being diagnosed with ASD or on the spectrum nationwide, I as a teacher am seeing a lot more of that in my individual classroom, and I think it's a challenge to all of us to try to change how we view our students, how we teach our students, how we reach our students, by opening up ourselves to talking with them and finding out how they learn best. Again, there are different types of learners, and I have found by providing the opportunities, not only the visuals on the board, but also putting materials on the school website. For example, we have some students who are very shy, very hesitant to talk in class, and yet they are terrific with the computer and they love computer-based projects. Our own son Joey, he's a shy young man, but he gets his message across quite well with emails, with texts, etc. So, to try to open how we approach these students with the passion and the understanding that they deserve just like any other kids we're teaching.

THERESA: So, as a parent with a son participating in the "Think College" model inclusive program, how has this influenced you as an educator? In particular, this year, because we are one year into the "Think College" model program.

JOHN: Well, I think just seeing how the openness of the program has really helped Joe to blossom more, it makes me appreciate it more in my own classroom setting, trying to provide more opportunities, different opportunities, to all of my students. I think has been a real reward for me as a teacher.

THERESAL: What about the special education committee that you serve on?

JOHN: Yes, our school- I am in a gifted and talented program. We have developed a special education advisory committee and, although I'm not a special education teacher, I'm on the committee because I am a special-ed parent and, also, I teach the secondary age students. What I've been trying to advocate to the committee and to the administration is that try to push more inclusion of the special education classes into the daily events of the secondary students. For example, our oldest special-ed students in the building right now are fifth and sixth grade level. But, next year, they're going to be transitioning to the junior high level, which

I teach, and I would like to see that class get incorporated in the daily life of the junior high students. For example, in my building, we have the elementary students on one of side of the building, the secondary students on the other side. We'd hope that, as the special-ed inclusion classes move up the line, they would become more involved with my general-ed students. For example, have lunch with us, attend daily events, not just the school events but the daily events, and just to be involved in the regular transitioning through the hallways that's such a part of our day to day life.

THERESA: So, do you think other school districts should consider a "Think College" model?

JOHN: Oh absolutely. I think it's wonderful, and frankly, not only do I think the district should consider it, but frankly, I would like to see districts maybe try to incorporate the program down into the high school down into the junior high level to ease the transitioning, to get the ball rolling earlier. I think it's important to provide every opportunity to interact on a daily basis with each other, I mean that truly is what we're talking about here with the neurodiversity. In that allowing everyone to treat each other with the dignity, the respect, the freedom that they themselves would want to be treated with.

THERESA: Again, transition really is ongoing throughout someone's life and it's not something that starts when a person just turns eighteen. It's just an ongoing process. I think that the lab school and the "Think College" model do allow that and allow for the opportunity of exploration for the next step.

JESSICA: This is Jessica Murray again. Thanks for listening to this episode of the Steps to Autism Acceptance Podcast. For links, bios, and more information on this episode, plus additional resources for autistic students transitioning to college, visit stairwaytostem.org. Thanks for listening and keep tuning in.