

# Globe West

## Determined, Not Deterred - Disability is no Barrier to Goals

By Franco Ordonez, Globe Staff 5/25/2003

FRANKLIN - Nothing is going to prevent 18-year-old Erica Paolillo from attending college and achieving her dreams, she says. Not the professional rat race that awaits, not the bad economy, not even the learning disabilities, she has struggled with all her life, which can turn out seemingly simple tasks into insurmountable obstacles.

With a little extra help from her school's special education department and a stubborn will to succeed, Paolillo, a Stoughton High School senior with a non-verbal learning disability that limits her visual and spatial organization skills, will graduate in the top third of her class next month and head off to Dean College in Franklin in the fall. "She's a bulldog," said her father, Christopher Paolillo.

More demurely, Paolillo allowed, "I've worked very hard." But now she is heading to college, where the challenges to succeed are typically much greater for a student with a learning disability. Class sizes are larger, students are more competitive, professors can be less patient, and the network of support is often weaker.

It is a challenge that scores of students with learning disabilities in the region face each year as more and more pursue college degrees. Though finding the right college can be excruciating for almost any student, it is even more difficult for those with learning disabilities: Not only do they have to find a school that matches their academic goals, they must also identify one that has the programs and services that match their special needs.

This week, Dean College will hold its first conference on the challenges that students with learning disabilities confront when they continue their education after high school. The two day seminar, Bridges to Success, which will begin Wednesday, is designed to guide students, special education professionals, guidance counselors, and high school and college administrators around the roadblocks that those with learning disabilities face in going on to college. The reality, specialists say, is that making the transition from high school to college can be much more difficult for students with

learning disabilities than families usually expect – especially once they discover that many of the services they received in high school are not available in college. Though high schools do – and in some cases are required by law to – provide things such as access to certain technology, the right staff, and separate academic expectations for students with learning disabilities, colleges generally have to meet lesser standards.

"All of those [universities] who are federally funded have to provide services, but they get to choose what services they provide," said Teresa Citro, executive director of the Learning Disabilities Association of Massachusetts. She said her office receives up to 50 calls a month in the fall and spring from concerned parents whose children are struggling in college. "That is what a lot of parents and kids don't understand – that just because I need [something] doesn't mean that that particular university or college will provide that specific need."

What is critical for graduating high school seniors with learning disabilities, she said, is that they research the colleges in which they are interested to make sure the schools can meet their particular needs.

Specialists attribute the increase in the number of special-needs students going to college in part to a growing array of services offered at higher-education institutions. They also say that high schools are being more aggressive in encouraging students, despite their limitations, that they are capable of succeeding at the college level and beyond.

"What's happening is they're better prepared to go to college because they know what the disability is," said Marybeth Kravets, author of the "K & W Guide to Colleges for Students with Learning Disabilities." "They understand it. They've accommodated for it. And they know what they need to do in college to be successful."

Approximately 42 students out of 950 enrolling freshmen and transfers expected this fall at Framingham State College have indicated they have a physical or learning disability. The college does not have a special-needs program, per se, but officials say that extra services such as extended-time testing, work-load reductions and extra call

assistance are provided to students who identify their needs to the school.

Unfortunately, school officials say, some students with extra needs do not alert the school until after they are in academic trouble, making it more difficult to assist them. "We certainly go the extra mile for students who have disabilities and want to have those disabilities recognized by the college," said Susanne Conley, Framingham State's associate dean for academic affairs. "I think we try to be welcoming and non-threatening to students with learning disabilities."

All but one of 22 Watertown High School seniors in the special-needs program will attend college in the fall, majoring in fields such as early-childhood education, graphic design, fashion merchandising, psychology, automotive technology, and drama. School officials say this is a testament to the success of an ongoing effort at the high school to push students to entertain higher aspirations.

"Fifteen years ago, we got excited when four or five students got accepted into college," said James B. Early, the administrator for special education for the Watertown public schools. "We're pushing it. We as a school system are saying, 'You have the ability and skills, you just have to look at it differently.'"

Timothy Barrett, who has a prevalent form of autism called Asperger's syndrome, looked at more than a dozen colleges and universities in the area with his father before settling on Dean College, a two-year school. Now heading into his second year at Dean, Barrett, 19, who is a member of the school's ARCH program for students with special needs, receives his extra tutoring twice a week to help him organize his studies and manage difficult assignments.

Concerned about his son's level of maturity and tendencies to defy authority, Barrett's father, Kevin Barrett, said he once seriously worried whether college was in the cards for Timothy, who has had a phenomenal first year – topped off last month when he was inducted into the Phi Theta Kappa Honor Society. "Now," his father said, "he's talking about going to MIT."

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