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Helping adults with autism live more independent lives

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By Nicole Crites **CONNECT**

PHOENIX (3TV) - When you hear about the 1 in 64 cases of autism in Arizona, the focus tends to be on early diagnosis and intervention.

There isn't a lot of attention focused on the 500,000 children with autism who will enter adulthood this decade, and what's being done to help them build hope for a more independent future.



First Place Transition Academy at Gateway Community College (Photo source: firstplaceaz.org)

At the First Place Transition Academy at Gateway Community College, adults with autism are learning about living independently, basic life skills like managing bank accounts, finding a job, and figuring out public transportation.

"What else can you get from an ATM?" the instructor asks.

Tentative hands raise.

"A credit card?" one student asks.

"No, let's try again," the teacher encourages and eventually prompts them: "Stamps, remember we talked about that? You can also get stamps from an ATM."

The class then shifts to talking about bank accounts and safety in your surroundings while making cash withdrawals from the ATM.

"They come in in the beginning and we provide really intensive support then we fade back so they're ready to live independently after about two years," said Danny Openden, CEO of SARRC, the Southwest Autism Research & Resource center.

SARRC and First Place work together to give adults with autism a two-year focused program and path to independence.

"I've been trying to use these skills that I've learned in class in real life and it definitely pays off for me," said student Ian McCoy.

He's worked at Fractured Prune Donuts in downtown Phoenix, for a year now, averaging 15- 20 hours a week.

The unemployment rate for adults with autism is about 86 percent.

Denise Resnik has a 24-year-old son with autism.

"It's daunting to think about what you do after your kid graduates high school and how you fill 168 hours every week with meaningful and productive activity," Resnik said.

Resnik co-founded SARRC in 1997 as a resource for parents and families, then started First Place to support people 18 and older transition to independent living.

"Once our kids leave high school, they slide backwards at a far greater rate than any other disability group," Resnik said.

"Fear is a powerful emotion and I've been fearing what happens when the school bus stops coming- almost from the day it arrived," she said.

Now, she's working to replace that fear with hope.

Dylan Kubitschek, is Ian McCoy's roommate.

At 18, he's just getting used to the idea of not living at home with his parents anymore.

"The independence is HUGE. You're so used to them helping you so much- that you've got to learn to do things for yourself," Kubitschek said.

"We kinda split the chores and try to be diligent and that's been working like a piece of cake," McCoy said.

SARRC and First Place organize social activities and help set up basic schedules that become routine.

"Are they getting groceries? And how clean are they keeping their apartments?" Openden explained.

"I'm impressed, I am excited and I am inspired," Resnik said.

McCoy & Kubitschek are living in one of eight apartments at 29 Palms, a mixed-housing complex in central Phoenix with senior citizens.

It's a beta test for a new apartment complex that is ready to break ground very soon, for adults like McCoy & Kubitschek, in the heart of downtown Phoenix.

It's set to take shape near 3rd Street & Catalina, close to light rail, public transit and easy access to two medical campuses.

50 units will open, and it's not just for adults with special needs. There will also be a supportive component for ASU & U of A doctoral and grad student fellows and alumni from Teach for America.

The property will also house the First Place Transition Academy and First Place leadership Institute.

"I feel like my future is going to be brilliant," said McCoy.

It's reality Kubitschek never really thought possible.

"If you asked me five years ago where I see myself, I could tell you 'I don't know.'" Now, Kubitschek said he's full of hope.

"I hope to have the normal adult life. I hope to have a good stable job. I hope to you know, maybe have a home with a family someday," he said.

[Click here to learn more about the plans and progress for First Place.](#)

And [click here to learn more about SARRC](#)

April is autism awareness month. [Click here](#) for our 3TV story about the new SARRC preschool enrolling typically progressing kids and toddlers on the autism spectrum maintaining a 1:4 teacher: student ratio.