What Next? Post-High School Opportunities for People with ASD

On the Spectrum
Higher Education for People with Autism

Throughout the country, an increasing number of colleges and universities are offering an array of supports for people with autism spectrum disorders. In some instances the schools are partnering with other segments of society, including private donors, to create pathways for people to earn degrees towards the goal of gainful employment. The following stories provide a brief overview of some post-high school opportunities.

First Place
Arizona-based First Place® is receiving national attention for its innovative approach to issues of housing, employment, lifelong education and research through its first mixed-use property, First Place-Phoenix.

Denise D. Resnik is co-founder of the Southwest Autism Research & Resource Center (SARRC), the parent of an adult son with ASD and founder of First Place-Phoenix. “There is no ‘one size fits all’ solution for young adults transitioning from high school,” says Ms. Resnik. “First Place is not for individuals who require a medical home or who do not need support to live independently. First Place is designed for about 80 percent of people with ASD who...
The Transition Academy

Tuition for the two-year First Place Transition Academy is $42,000 per year and includes the cost of rent, 40 courses focused on independent living, interpersonal skills and career readiness and the experience of living independently. The fee is private pay, however, Ms. Resnik says discussions are underway with government sources regarding possible help in reducing costs.

Says Ms. Resnik, “The apartments serve as independent living classrooms. The community-at-large represents a model learning lab equipped with natural supports.” The Transition Academy currently offers courses at Gateway Community College in Phoenix with plans for expansion to other college campuses.

In advance of the completion of First Place-Phoenix, an affordable living apartment complex launched in partnership with the Foundation for Senior Living in 2015, is a beta site for the First Place Transition Academy. Seniors and adults with ASD are next-door neighbors. Courses are developed and taught by First Place’s operating partner, SARRC, together with First Place Executive Director Jeff

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researching viable residential solutions. “I believe the autism community today is where the country was 40 years ago with senior housing,” she says. “We need more models for people in different settings, with varying features and at a range of price points.”

Upon completion, First Place-Phoenix will comprise three interrelated uses: 50 studio, one and two-bedroom apartments for residents; a Transition Academy for 32 students; and a 10,000-square-foot Leadership Institute. Situated in the heart of Phoenix within walking distance to public transit, and slated for completion in late 2017, First Place-Phoenix is being funded by a $25 million capital campaign that includes public, private and charitable sources.

Ross and Leadership Institute Curriculum Specialist Valerie Paradiz, PhD. All students are engaged in paid internships or volunteer employment.

Dr. Paradiz has a diagnosis of ASD and is the parent of two young adults with ASD. In addition to her consulting practice, she serves as part-time director of the Autistic Global Initiative, a division

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of the Autism Research Institute, and she is a national board member of Autism Speaks.

Upon completion in 2017, the First Place mixed-use property will house the Transition Academy.

**First Place Apartments**

The apartments reflect the research conducted by Ms. Resnik’s team, including design goals and guidelines set forth in the “Opening Doors” report, co-published in 2009 by SARRC, the Urban Land Institute and Arizona State University. The apartments will feature an on-site wellness center equipped with a private telemedicine kiosk with computer access. “We are partnering with hospitals and clinicians in providing comprehensive training to support individuals with autism in managing their health and wellness,” says Ms. Resnik. “By doing so, we are also training the medical community to better serve individuals with autism.”

**National Leadership Institute**

The third component of the First Place Project is the Leadership Institute, intended, in large measure, to train direct support professionals and health care providers, advance research on best practices and public policy and assist other communities in opening doors to more options for people with ASD. “Our goal is to make more options available to more people. It is stultifying to try to do only one thing for everybody with ASD,” says Dr. Paradiz. “We need many choices and locations, and we need to demonstrate results rather than limit ourselves by prescriptive policy.”

Internships and paid fellowships will enable graduate and doctoral students from Arizona State University and Teach for America (TFA) alumni to conduct research or fulfill graduate practicum requirements. “They will provide direct support to residents and demonstrate what it means to be a good neighbor in a neuro-diverse community.”

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says Ms. Resnik. Fellowships are paid positions, and include rent in the apartments.

“The intent is to put forward information, based on new models, to support policy and decision-making at Federal and State levels,” states Dr. Paradiz. “Annual symposia will bring together researchers and leaders who will share information and collaborate on policies and projects devoted to adult life on the spectrum.” Additionally, Dr. Paradiz notes, “We are developing curricula and real-estate models to spur adaptation and replication across the country.”

Ms. Resnik echoes this sentiment. “We need everyone participating,” she says. “We need all parties at the table to increase capacity and options.”