

## Success Happens When We All Work Together

By: Veolia Hawkins



The day has come sooner than I expected it to come. My son Glenn, who happens to have autism, has decided he really does not want to return to high school. He spent the last four years in high school and was ready to move on. Unfortunately, he was not able to earn enough Carnegie Units to receive a high school diploma. At this point, I was thinking he could return to the high school or go to work. After carefully listening to his reasons for not wanting to return to high school, we went to Louisiana Rehabilitation Services (LRS) to seek assistance in employment options. LRS interviewed and evaluated Glenn to determine his interest. I was also in contact with the group, Confront and Conquer, which is a faith based group for parents of children with special needs. In this group, we share experiences with each other. During this time period Families Helping Families, a parent led non-profit organization that promotes inclusion and believes all people with disabilities are entitled to a meaningful life, invited me to attend the InclusionMATTERS

Conference and even paid my registration fee. At this conference, I attended several wonderful sessions, but the session that resonated the most to me was a presentation by LSU Human Development Center staff on the PEAC program offered at Delgado Community College. For the first time I was thinking Glenn could go to college and learn skills that would make him more employable in a job he would love. After several meetings with the PEAC staff, I decided this was a good fit for Glenn. It was now summertime and I knew I had to accomplish a lot to get him into this program in the fall. Since Glenn had not officially graduated or completed high school and as a student with a disability, he is entitled to attend school until his 22nd birthday, I decided to ask Jefferson Parish Public School System (JPPSS) to pay for the program. During this same time, Jefferson Parish Human Services Authority (JPHSA), the local government entity for individuals with developmental disabilities announced limited funding for technology that would enhance individual's ability to participate in the community. We requested assistance and Glenn was awarded technology needed to attend college successfully. From here, Families Helping Families stepped in and assisted me with calling a meeting with all the necessary players. At this meeting, we discussed the pros and cons of Glenn participating in the Post-Secondary Education for All Collaborative (PEAC) program at Delgado. Glenn loves graphic arts and had taken all the classes JPPSS offered for this program. He attended Coullier Career Center and won an award for graphic arts. His goal was to be able to attend Delgado and continue taking graphic art classes. At the end of the meeting, everyone agreed this was a great opportunity for Glenn – but we still had one hurdle. We needed to be able to convince the special education director of JPPSS to pay for the program. After communicating with the director, she was on board and agreed to enter into an agreement with LSU and Delgado to pay Glenn's tuition and fees to attend Delgado. I am so proud of my son and all the agencies that stepped up to make sure he had every opportunity to live his dream. This could not have happened without everyone working together. Thanks to Families Helping Families who opened my eyes to this opportunity, stood by us throughout the whole process, and supported our dreams. Thanks to Jefferson Parish Public Schools and Jefferson Parish Human Services Authority for their financial support. Thanks to LSU – Human Development Center and Delgado Community College for collaborating and creating a program for students with developmental disabilities to be able to have a real college experience and learn valuable skills for employment. Thanks to LRS for all the work you did with Glenn when we thought he was going to go straight to work and thanks to the special groups, Confront and Conquer and Life Center Full Gospel Baptist Cathedral Center Sunday School members for all your support and prayers during this time period and Preferred Care Givers for their assistance. Glenn is now at Delgado Community College, successfully taking graphic art classes and loving the college experience. In this short period, I have watched my son grow from a high school student to a more independent college student. Life is going great for Glenn! In summary, the purpose of this article is to encourage other parents to think big and to encourage your children to reach their full potential.

**Veolia Hawkins and Glenn Hawkins Jr.**