



JOEL

Teaching Our Brother INDEPENDENCE, NOT DEPENDENCE

Families Helping Families has been doing a lot of great youth-centered workshops and training. These workshops are centered around the very topics that a group of young adults with disabilities expressed to us they needed. One of the topics we have been doing is a series of healthy foods presented by the LSU AgCenter. Other topics of interest included transportation and health care.

Many times when I have contacted families about attending these workshops, I get the same response, my child will not understand, they can't participate, they do not need it, or even, I do everything for them it is not necessary. This kind of response strikes a nerve with me. How can a parent put that kind of limitation already without even trying to take them to at least one of the workshops? Now I know, they do not say this out of malicious intent, but in the end, this is the kind of mentality that puts limitations on their children. We should be doing our best to push them in the direction of independence, not dependence.

I can speak from personal experience about this because I have a brother, Joel, with Down syndrome. I knew my brother understood most things happening around him, but I questioned his participation and how much he would understand at these workshops. He is nonverbal but tries his best to communicate. Sometimes, strangers may be able to understand him but for the most part, only his family and close friends can. Thus, he does not normally try to speak in front of strangers. We decided to bring him to the youth workshops anyway. We thought it can't do any harm and it is something productive to get him out of the house. It has turned out to be such a great experience for him.

He has attended every single one of our youth workshops and it has been a great experience not only for him but for us as well. He has really enjoyed these workshops, and to our surprise, has been very talkative and participates well. He has really come out of his shell and answered the presenter's questions ecstatically. Even though his words do not come out perfectly and the presenter may not understand everything he says, I know that he is not only learning, but he is excited about it.

He is the main reason I am thankful to have this job here at Families Helping Families. I love being able to give other young adults with disabilities the same opportunities to learn and branch out about topics that are relevant to them. I get to find pleasure in doing this professionally and personally, and it is such a great feeling.

As mentioned before, our youth workshop topics have all been centered around topics that our youth themselves told us were important to them. We gathered this information through a focus group we did earlier this year. The topics we have covered so far include; transitioning to adult health care, healthy foods, physical activity, stretching your food \$, how to ride the public bus, self-advocacy, transitioning into employment, and navigating the internet safely. We hope you can join us for our future youth workshops.

Raquel Casteneda