Social Skills Support Self-Determination: My Story
Will Farrior, with Cindi May and Gail Farrior

My name is Will Farrior and I am a junior at the College of Charleston in the Realizing Educational and Career Hopes (REACH) Program. Going to college is something I have wanted to do for a very long time. Some people ask me why I wanted to go to college, and for me that answer was easy—I want to have a job, have a life, and have friends. At the College of Charleston, I have lots of friends—some of them have disabilities and some don’t. I have taken more than 10 different classes, have had the chance to experience lots of jobs, and have tried to figure out what I want to do. I have also learned about my disability, how to explain it to others, and how to rely on my strengths.

It was not always easy for me. I have Asperger’s and I learn differently. In the past I had trouble making friends. I used to talk too much or too long and I didn’t know how to take turns or listen to other people. Now, I want to share how I have changed in college, how I was able to reach my goals, and how I think college can help other people with disabilities. I want to be the one encouraging others and helping them understand what they can do.

What helps me at the College of Charleston? The main thing is taking regular college classes. These have included intro to Business, Public Speaking, Psychology, Digital Media, Graphic Novel, and Intro to Education. I study hard in each of my classes. I really like the projects, as they give me a chance to get out and use what I know, and to work with other students. But the class that made the biggest difference for me was an Interpersonal Communication class with Dr. Deb McGee. Dr. McGee explained and broke down the various parts of communication, so that I could better understand body language and facial expressions. I learned how to stay on one topic when I speak with other people. Dr. Deb also helped me understand people from different backgrounds so that I could do well in lots of different situations. For example, I have one friend who likes me to get to the point right away; he does not like long-winded conversations or much detail. When I talk with him, I try to keep it simple and straightforward.

Before college, I had learned some communication strategies, like counting to 10 before speaking and letting others take turns leading the conversation. But in college I could put all of those skills into practice and use them in real social situations. When I am in class, I know when to let other people talk. I don’t hog the conversation or take over the whole class. Now I try to listen to others and absorb the information they are sharing, and then decide when it’s my turn to speak. Communication is like music. The bottom line is that you are the producer, and no matter what you are producing—a paper, a presentation, a test—it is your work of art. It must represent what you want to communicate but it also must make sense to those who receive it. If a professor is receiving it, then it must also be of excellent quality. Our professors challenge us to make great art in our communication.

With more confidence in my communication skills, I decided to pledge a fraternity—Alpha Kappa Psi, a business fraternity. While I was pledging I had to learn information about the founder of the fraternity. I also learned how to “sell myself in an elevator”—that is, to describe myself succinctly and clearly like you would if you were introducing yourself to someone and only had a few moments to do so. I learned how to explain my strengths and goals in a very short period of time and to let other people know who I am and what I want to do. I also learned to cut to the chase, not ramble on. I now know how to listen to people and take feedback from others without being so hard on myself.

Another thing I have learned that it is very important is to understand the person you are talking to. For example, I have one friend who really likes to joke around. I am more serious and direct most of the
time. I had to learn that I shouldn’t always take everything he says so seriously. He often uses sarcasm and at first it was hard to know when he was being sarcastic. I have also learned how to let him know when the joking and sarcasm have gone too far without hurting his feelings.

Before college, my friends were mostly my family. The other students at school didn’t seem to “get” me and sometimes were mean to me. I had more trouble with my emotions and making friends. I didn’t know how to rely on my strengths. I didn’t want a label. I didn’t want to be pinned down by my disability. Now I have learned to talk about my disability and to use my strengths to express myself. I am very comfortable with myself. The students here seem to recognize my differences but are accepting of them.

My new communication skills have also helped me professionally. At work, I try to stay on point and keep conversations relevant. I have had several paid internships at the College of Charleston. I have worked in the Admissions Office and in the “Charleston 40,” a group of students who get to give tours to students who might want to come to the college. I recently got the position of Clyde the Cougar (our mascot) and I get to be the Cougar at lots of sporting events. I also worked at the YWCA and helped coordinate an event for Martin Luther King Day. Last semester I worked in the public relations department of a hospital, and this semester I will work for a non-profit.

When I came to college I thought I wanted to be a teacher, but as I explored that option I realized I was not going to earn all the credentials needed to teach in the public schools. I talked with different people on campus to explore career options that fit with my personal interests and abilities. I considered a variety of careers including business, but now that I am in the final stretch of my college education, I have decided on Communications as my major. It helps me with interpersonal stuff, understanding myself, and growing professionally. I really want to help other people who have Asperger’s and I know I can. I definitely want to assist others who want to go on to college. And someday I want to be able to help my own children understand the world and do their best.

Cindi May is a Professor of Psychology at the College of Charleston, and is Project Director for the TPSID Grant awarded to the REACH Program. One goal of her research is to develop strategies and interventions that will optimize functioning for older adults and individuals with intellectual disabilities.

Will Farrior is a junior at the College of Charleston. His overall goal at the College is to help others view all types of students with disabilities as equals. By doing that, he is helping his peers break out of their shells and succeed.

Gail Farrior is Will Farrior’s mother, and a strong advocate for people with disabilities.