

HOPE FOR AUTISM

TED AND MICAH'S EXCELLENT ADVENTURE

Dukes with autism find success at JMU despite their disability

By any measure, Micah Hodges ('15) and Ted Aronson ('16) have been successful at JMU.

Micah, a gregarious music industry major from Glen Allen, Virginia, performed with the Marching Royal Dukes, joined a social fraternity, and this fall is a FrOG — First Year Orientation Guide — helping JMU freshmen adjust to college life. Ted, a nursing major from Arlington, Virginia, competes on JMU's archery team, participates in several Jewish social organizations, served as president of the Student Advisory Council for Nursing, and has completed an independent study that his professor calls "revolutionary."

Both have autism.

Diagnosed as a young child, Ted benefitted from early and extensive interventions that included speech and occupational therapies.

"All through elementary, middle and high school," Ted says, "I was much more focused on academics instead of being friends with people, having peers. When I came to college, and even the last part of my senior year of high school, I thought that it would be more beneficial to shift from being purely academic to having school also be a way of learning social skills."

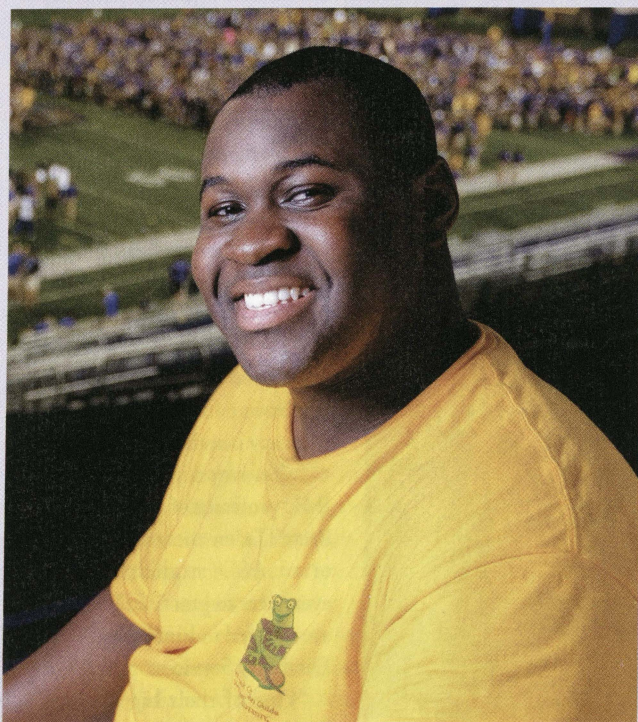
Micah's experience with autism is similar, although his diagnosis came much later. As a high-school student, he knew something was wrong, but he didn't know what. Once he discovered it was autism, he says,

"I was devastated. How do I have autism?"

Eventually, though, Micah accepted the diagnosis. "Truthfully," he says, "I do have to live with Asperger's for the rest of my life, but the thing is, how you cope with it."

For Micah, real progress occurred when he came to JMU. "My first challenges were trying to make a group of friends. I found myself very isolated, lonely as a freshman. I would sit alone at lunch every single day. I would always have my head down. It was very difficult to talk to [others]... especially for me, as a minority student as well."

That changed in the spring of Micah's freshman year. "I had rushed a fraternity called Phi Mu Alpha Sinfonia, which is a men's social fraternity, and I had gotten a bid. ... I became a brother at the end of spring."



Both Micah Hodges ('15) and Ted Aronson ('16) know their strengths and weaknesses, and when barriers present themselves, they figure out how to navigate.

'We want all students to succeed at JMU, and that includes students with ASD.'

— MATT TRYBUS, *assistant director of the Office of Disability Services*

Both Micah and Ted credit JMU's friendly and open community for helping them carve out successful college experiences despite their disability. Ted chose Madison in part because JMU "embraces being a whole person, like having that social aspect, going to football games, but also being academic," he says.

Nevertheless, college life can present social challenges for students with autism.

"There are still times when I'm talking to people and I'm thinking of what to say, and I don't know the correct response when someone says something — what's socially acceptable, what's not," Ted says. "There are still small blurred lines in there, but I try to calculate it as best I can ... For someone with Asperger's, we don't understand the social dynamics of a situation, but if we can understand the people — hence their motives, their view of the world — we can have a better understanding of it, so surrounding yourself with different sorts of people would help accomplish that."

CREATING SUCCESS

Matt Trybus, assistant director of the Office of Disability Services at JMU, says that Ted and Micah's experiences are not atypical. During high school and before, he says, the responsibility for accommodating any disability rests with schools, often with significant parental involvement. When a student enrolls in college, however, managing and seeking accommodations for a disability like autism becomes the student's responsibility. It can create a barrier: How do you get a student who has trouble communicating to do this, including disclosing their disability?

"The system asks people to do some-


thing they may not be ready to do," Trybus says. The solution, "is trying to move the student toward more independence as they're coming [to college] because they're going to be having to self-disclose in order to receive accommodations and navigate college."

Trybus says the students who are most successful have meta-cognitive awareness — they know their strengths and weaknesses, accepting both, and when barriers present themselves, they figure out how to navigate.

"They've integrated their disability into their identity," he says. "That's not the definitive quality of who they are, but it's who they are. Those with visible disabilities don't have any of the integration issues because everyone sees it. ... You can't hide it." Autism, on the other hand, is often an unseen disability.

One pattern Trybus sees is a conflict in students who do not seek help initially. They face a conundrum: Do I suffer the perceived stigma of autism or do I seize the opportunity to re-invent myself? It often comes down to the question of how much a student wants to succeed.

Trybus is aware of about a dozen JMU students who self-identify as having autism. Among the accommodations he can provide these students are additional time and better surroundings to help with test taking. "My advice [to students with autism] is more to know what their strengths are ... what they like, what they are passionate about — and where their limitations are," Trybus says. It's also helpful, he says, "to know what things, what people and what strategies have been helpful [in the past] ... and know what their obstacles are to asking for help."

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people entering college. But for people with that disability, it's a lot harder. ... Getting along with roommates is certainly one of them. Interacting with teachers is another."

Tjaden has a special empathy for these students because he understands how much potential they have. "With most differences, there are strengths and weaknesses," he says. "Very often we tend to focus on the weaknesses that come with a particular disability and not enough on the strengths."

THE GIFT OF AUTISM

Until the mysteries of autism are unlocked, families affected by the disorder will continue to focus on the positives.

"It bothers me when people kind of pity me: 'Oh, I'm so sorry you have an autistic son,'" Laurie Weese says. "But I say, 'He's great. He's just different. He doesn't talk ... but he's a great kid.'"

Siblings of children on the spectrum exhibit a special empathy. "I am not a naturally patient person," Lindsay admits. "But Sam has taught me that everybody has setbacks, whether it is an experience or a disability, and he makes me so much more aware of that. I just love him so much." Lindsay has told her parents unequivocally that she intends to take care of her brother for the rest of his life.

The same is true of Garrett Weese's brother Connor. "Connor is a wonderful kid," Robert Weese says. "He's the youngest, but at the same time he has big shoulders. He's had to help a lot, especially with Garrett. It's easy for Laurie and me to forget he's the youngest because we rely on him to help. I thought it would be a problem, but now he's enthusiastic. If we go roller skating, he says, 'I'll go with Garrett,' and he loves doing it."

Families like the Weeses and the Finlaysons would agree that there is a certain joy in embracing ASD individuals for who they are and what they can offer. Perhaps that is a lesson autism can teach us all. 