

On Campus Transition offers COLLEGE EXPERIENCE

by Lorrię DeFrank



Oliver Lowe at The Arc Jacksonville Village where he now lives and works.

Oliver Lowe's future opened up when he stepped on UNF's campus.

Like many people with intellectual and developmental disabilities, the 24-year-old expected to be living with his parents well into his 30s, without much hope of supporting himself.

Then he entered UNF's nationally lauded On Campus Transition program, a partnership between the University and The Arc Jacksonville. Lowe attended college classes and participated in activities with other students. He served as a Best Buddies officer and helped manage the basketball team. When he graduated from OCT, Lowe was proud of his accomplishment and left with a certificate in hand and the skills and confidence he needed to live independently.

Today, Lowe lives and works as a resident advocate through AmeriCorps at The Arc Jacksonville Village, an independent living community a few miles from campus, with plans to enroll in ministry school to cater to youth. "Because of OCT, I am able to be doing the things I am doing," said Lowe, crediting the experience with teaching him life skills and forging relationships with people he never would have had as friends.

"It made me more outgoing and independent. It was truly amazing."

Debbie Johnson, '85, '89, a UNF Foundation board member, alum and CPA, helped start the program in 2006. "The goal is to prepare the students to be as equipped as possible to live as independently as possible, to find meaningful employment and to enjoy their community," Johnson said. As a longtime member and past chair of The Arc Jacksonville Board of Directors as well as a past board president and former interim director of UNF's Alumni Services, Johnson said she and others visited schools around the country and came up short with what they wanted for Jacksonville. So they created their own model that benefits everyone involved.

One of the first programs in Florida and the first to have a residential component, OCT offers two- and four-year programs. About 60 percent of students live at an apartment complex near UNF, on campus or at The Village.

Bernadette Gismonde, OCT director, said the program has served more than 100 students and given them a chance at a college experience. "This is a sustainable program that has been successful for more than 13 years," Gismonde said. "It attracts students from all over the country. That has to say something about Jacksonville."

The program's first director and UNF alum Dr. Crystal Makowski, '05, said students are involved in planning their individualized study programs and mentors are paired with students based on skills and interests. OCT offers internships in 28 campus departments to enhance job readiness, said Makowski, who was involved with developing UNF's model and now serves as vice president for special projects for The Arc Jacksonville. "Integrating a full college experience with matriculated students and faculty is really preparing them for the next step after college," she said. "All these soft skills that we take for granted translate into actual technical skills later in the workplace."

Bernadette Moran's daughter Moira Rossi is an OCT graduate who at 30 has found success in theater, nonprofit volunteer work and employment. An ardent Arc volunteer and board member who helped develop the OCT program and The Village, Moran maintains that UNF's program stands out for its inclusiveness and opportunities. And, says Moran, it allows the young adults to fit in. "They are now like their siblings and cousins, and it's amazing what the program does for their psychology," Moran said. "It also has made us a leader in the world of disabilities. I believe there are people who move to Jacksonville because of its reputation for opportunities for their children." She said the student mentors benefit greatly as well, and their views about individuals with disabilities are always transformed.

Former mentor and alum Wes Caton is working on his master's at UNF while working as assistant property manager at The Village. "It's amazing to see some of the people who live here now, and to think that a couple of years ago I was teaching them how to make toast and shop for groceries. Now, they are living mostly independently," Caton said. "I've got residents telling me they don't really need any help anymore. They've figured this out. It's so inspiring."