

# Riding the Aggies Elevated roller coaster

By Dawn Bagley, parent

*(Note: "Cannibal" is the name of a roller coaster at Lagoon, an amusement park near Utah State University.)*

I met Bryce at Lagoon a couple weekends ago with some of our other children, and went on Cannibal for the first time. I'm not an overly adventurous person, but I felt like I wanted to go on it. I decided to not think too much about what we were about to do and just patiently wait in line, while distracting myself with conversations with the kids. When I got into the stall, waiting to board the ride, I had a minor panic attack, but moved forward, because what else was there to do at this point? Getting buckled in, my anxiety piqued and I started giving the kids instructions on what to do if I had a cardiac event while on the ride. As the doors opened at the top of the ride, I thought, this isn't so bad, but was also anxious to get the first part of it over with. I like roller coasters, I just don't like heights. The rest of the ride was over before I knew it, but was exhilarating and full of all of the ups and downs you expect and enjoy from a ride like this, and I would definitely do it again.

Getting Bryce to Utah State in the Aggies Elevated program has been similar to my experience at Lagoon on the Cannibal. When I heard about Aggies Elevated, I instantly knew this was for Bryce and set out on over a year's process of getting him accepted and ready. During that time, I had to distract myself from thinking about what was about to happen and just plug along, knowing that this would be an amazing opportunity



*Bryce and Dawn at Utah State University.*

for him. As the semester opened with the Connections class I had a little panic trying to figure out how this was all going to work, but we moved forward, because of two things; I have faith that this was where Bryce is supposed to be, and I also have faith in this program and the people running it. Moving day was filled with last-minute, anxiety-filled instructions to Bryce and his sister on how I thought things should be taken care of in my absence.

The entire time of preparing him to get there I kept telling myself, 'If we can just get him there it will be fine. If we can just get him there and settled, he will take off.' I was only slightly prepared for the roller coaster ride of keeping him there. I have to say though; you and your staff did an excellent job priming me for the experience. I was pleased that he contacted me a lot during the first month of being up there because I

needed it as much as he did.

My full-time job became keeping him there, which I was mostly prepared for due to you and your staff's counseling and prep work. At times my mama bear would come lumbering out of her cave and would almost jump in my car and make the trip to Logan to fix everything. During this time I listened to your Parents Question and Answer session from Orientation (over and over) and it soothed my nerves.

You said, "There is dignity in taking risks, and there is dignity in failing. And it's okay if Johnny comes in and does part of an assignment and then goes, 'oh, dang, I really should have done more on that' and learns from it, instead of mom coming in and saving his bacon and making it so that everything is wonderful. We all learn from failure. We all learn from taking risks

outside of our comfort zone. So often, (I wouldn't say that any of your students are in that place because they're here today), we shield our students from taking those big steps and those things that our other students without disabilities may just naturally do, because we don't want them to fail; it's devastating when they do but what do we learn from that failure. And I think that's a good balance to look at. Hey, is this something that they can fail safely; and Aggies Elevated is a really good place to learn those things and suffer consequences that happen in a very supported environment."

I grew to understand that you are not setting him up for failure, but that you are setting the stage for him to fail in a safe environment so he can learn. It has been hard to help him see why he needs

to be there and I didn't want a failure to make him throw his hands in the air and give up. It's been so exciting for me to watch him learn how to learn. I heard a lot of 'I don't like homework. . . Homework is hard. . . I don't know why we take notes.' One day, on the phone,

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he told me that someone had called him about woodworking. I asked, who it was, what they called for, where they were from. He couldn't answer any of my questions. This. This is why we are learning to take notes. Those moments when he recognizes how it applies to his real-world life and makes the connection. They are sometimes few and

far between, but we see the wisdom in steps.

It has occurred to me that this experience has been as much for me as it has been for Bryce. As it is with most parents, we tend to do too much for our children, and for children with disabilities, maybe more so. I'm learning to let go and let be; to step back and let you do your job and also let him figure it out.

This has been the most painful, stressful and tearful, yet joyous, exciting and spiritual experience. And I just wanted to thank you for the ride. Thank you for the weekly progress reports, they soothe my soul. You and your staff are amazing and we appreciate all of your hard work and wonderful specialized set of skills and talents you each have. You make a difference in people's lives!

# AGGIES ELEVATED

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## UtahStateUniversity

*Aggies Elevated at Utah State University believes that all individuals, regardless of ability, have the right to meaningful employment, lifelong learning, self-determination and full community inclusion. Utilizing the MyCLIMB (My Career Ladder to Independence, Maturity & Balance) person-centered planning model, Aggies Elevated students, along with invited family members and/or other stakeholders, will chart their own paths toward independence within an individualized framework of supports that identifies challenges, builds on individual strengths and encourages personal responsibility.*

- 8 out of 9 AE graduates (88%) were employed 90 days after graduation (the 9th student is serving an LDS service mission). Nationally, only about 15% of individuals with intellectual disabilities have paid community employment.<sup>1</sup>
- 100% of the eight AE graduates who are employed are paid at or above minimum wage and work in meaningful, competitive jobs working an average of 33 hours/week, making an average of \$9.84/hour. In contrast, in Utah, only approximately 17% of individuals with intellectual disabilities one year out of high school have competitive employment.<sup>2</sup> Nationally, youth with intellectual disability who complete PSE programs earn 73% more income than those who do not.<sup>3</sup>
- 6 out of 9 AE graduates (67%) are living independently, alone or with roommates. In contrast, nationally, only 27% of youth with disabilities are living independently<sup>4</sup> and in Utah, only 28% of youth with disabilities report living independently after high school.<sup>5</sup>

1 NCI Data Brief (2012), Siperstein, Parker, & Drascher (2014). 2 USBE (2016). 3 Sannicandro (2016). 4 NTLS (2005). 5 USBE (2016) www.utah-pso.org

[www.aggieselevated.usu.edu](http://www.aggieselevated.usu.edu)