

Senate Bill No. 2269 Testimony from Mitchell Schaff

Representative Owens and Members of the House Education Committee,

My name is Mitchell Schaff. I am testifying today in support of Senate Bill No. 2269.

Sitting next to me is my son Dominic. Dominic was born on January 3rd, 1996 at Mercy Medical Center in Williston. At birth, Dominic suffered some type of oxygen deprivation, which led to what is called an intra-ventricular hemorrhage in his brain. This in turn caused permanent brain damage, and resulted in Dominic being developmentally disabled. He was transported to St. Alexius hospital the day after his birth, and spent most of the next six weeks in the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit. He underwent multiple surgeries during that time, including an operation which inserted what is called a ventriculoperitoneal (VP) shunt, which relieves pressure from a buildup of excess cranial fluid by venting it into his abdomen.

During Dominic's stay at St. Alexius, his mother and I were informed that given the damage caused by the hemorrhage, it was likely that Dominic would never walk, and that he would be severely disabled. That aspect of his diagnosis turned out to be incorrect, and though Dominic does have some definite motor control issues, he is not only able to walk but has successfully learned how to ride a bicycle on his own.

Beyond those motor control issues however, Dominic does have some significant cognitive disabilities which prevent him from participating in many of the activities that his peers do without second thought. Driving a car, for example, is not a possibility. Any type of spatial or time estimates is very difficult for Dominic. During his high school years, any thought of Dominic attending an institution of higher education was an unattainable dream. Or so we thought.

I learned of the ASTEP program from Dominic's teachers at the Bismarck Life Education program, which Dominic attended after graduating from Century High School. Knowing how important my collegiate experience was to my own life and career, I was very pleased to hear about the ASTEP program, and sought more information about the program.

In the spring of 2017, Dominic was accepted in to the ASTEP program, and attended until his completion in May of 2020. During that time, Dominic attended the same classes that his peers attended, did the same assignments, lived in Dakota Hall, and participated in on campus events. He had support each night from the Minot Easter Seals organization, but was largely independent throughout the days. While attending the program, Dominic worked at Buffalo Wild Wings, the Elevation restaurant at the Minot Country Club, and for Sodexo at the Minot State University dining hall. His ASTEP mentors provided transportation, support, and guidance during his initial employment at each of these jobs, then faded back away from him as Dominic became more confident at each position.

The experience that Dominic gained through the ASTEP program was immense, and led to a much stronger sense of independence and self-confidence. That same experience was a critical factor after graduation last summer, and its benefits manifested themselves when in June of 2020, Dominic applied for a position at the new Costco store in Bismarck, and was hired almost immediately.

Dominic now works 25 hours each week at Costco, and during the opening months he was working full time. I can assure you that the likelihood of Dominic having this type of position was very low, prior to his experiences at Minot State University in conjunction with the ASTEP program. Those experiences have prepared and enabled Dominic to succeed wildly beyond our expectations, and have given Dominic a chance to experience activities that so many disabled individuals never get.

Senate Bill 2269 will give those same benefits to other individuals like Dominic who might not otherwise have that chance. I humbly ask you to please support this Bill, and assure you that other students who are able to attend programs like ASTEP will not only benefit from the experiences that the ASTEP program provides, those experiences will in fact have positive impacts which will last their entire lives.

Thank you.