

My Life with Autism

My name is Ben Kolster, I'm 18 years old and live in Jacksonville, FL with my parents and my older brother Ethan, who will be 20 next month. I attend the North Florida School of Special Education (NFSSE), located in Jacksonville, FL. Ethan and I are on the Autistic Spectrum. Ethan was diagnosed with Autism at the age of 3. By the time I reached my 1st birthday, my parents noticed some speech and language delays. They had me tested and I was diagnosed with developmental delays. I began speech and occupational therapy when I was 18 months old. When I was 2 years old, I was formally diagnosed with Autism, and at the age of 5, I was diagnosed with ADHD. My parents worked diligently to prepare for a new chapter in their lives raising two sons with special needs. My mother, Lisa, chose to devote her time advocating for us and seeking out services to provide us with the numerous educational and developmental support services. My father, David, works in the banking industry and is active in various community organizations. My parents have together worked as a team for nearly 20 years to provide my brother and I with a solid foundation.

I started school at the age of 3 in a special education program for children with developmental delays at Kernan Trail Elementary School (KTE) in Jacksonville, FL. By the time I reached Kindergarten, I was placed in a mainstream classroom and remained there until the 2nd Grade. I had excellent teachers and I have fond memories of their guidance and dedication that provided me with a strong educational foundation. For me, the move from an ESE classroom to a general education classroom was not easy. There were over 40 students and two teachers in my 2nd grade class. It was difficult for me to process information and make friends in that environment. I needed extra help to succeed. That is what led my parents to begin the search for a new school and ultimately enroll my brother and I at NFSSE.

In February of 2008, Ethan and I started school NFSSE. Over the past decade, I have been well educated in mathematics, language arts, science, social studies, and the fine arts. Our school holds an annual Science Fair and a Cultural Fair, both of which I participated in. I was a member of several of the school's afterschool clubs, including music club, art club, and TV production. In 2015, I was elected Student Council President. In 2018, my brother and I were asked to emcee NFSSE's "Dinner on the Farm", an annual fundraiser held on the school campus. This past March, I had the opportunity to emcee this year's talent show where students have an opportunity to showcase their various talents. I really enjoyed sharing the stage with my co-host, who is a fellow classmate of mine.

Ethan and I are currently in the Transition Program at NFSSE. The Transition Program provides individuals with special needs ages 18-22 years vocational experience in addition to life skills, both on and off the school campus. When I entered the Transition program last year, one of my job sites was participating in the Art Enterprise program at NFSSE. My focus is on mixed media, a creative and unique way of using paints, papers, broken glass, as well of various sources from nature as resources to create a collage art piece. It has given me the opportunity to express my creativity in a variety of ways. It has been an incredible experience and I look forward to gaining more vocational experience in the upcoming school year. Other jobs I have held include working at Publix, the Jacksonville Public Library, and Step Up for Students. My brother and I were President and Vice President of NFSSE's Aktion Club, a service club for adults with disabilities, with more than 12,000 members worldwide. This past February, my brother and I were among a small group of students who got to go represent our school at a Disability Awareness Day rally at the capitol in Tallahassee, FL. We got to see disability advocates voice their concerns and state legislators making exciting announcements, most importantly, representing NFSSE and who we stand for. It was a very memorable experience that I'll always remember.

I have been fortunate to have many friends growing up. My brother and I have developed close relationships with several friends that I have known since birth. Our friends have been very accepting of us. Through these friendships, I have accepted who I am and have become appreciative of what I can do as an individual living with Autism. I have learned that I have my own talents, just like any other individual. In addition to my immediate family, I have been blessed with a large extended family on both sides. Both sets of my grandparents are still living and are have been extremely supportive of my journey. My extended family lives in various parts of the US. Every few years, we gather for a family reunion. It is incredibly special to me to be able to spend time with them.

In closing, I am excited about my journey into adulthood. I look forward to seeking employment, working on my independent living skills, and preparing for the next chapter of my life. My goal is to obtain my first paid job within the next year. I enjoy research, writing, and giving speeches, and thrive best in a highly-structured environment. I hope to eventually start my own blog – stay tuned!!

I would like to leave you with a quote from my all-time favorite television host:

“Knowing that we can be loved exactly as we are gives us all the best opportunity for growing into the healthiest of people”

~ Fred Rogers



Ethan and I in Tallahassee for Developmental Disabilities
Here I am emceeing at the Talent Show, March 2nd, 2018

Awareness Day, February 14th, 2018



Me with one of my mixed media pieces,

November 2017

Links:

North Florida School of Special Education: <https://www.northfloridaschool.org>

Developmental Disabilities Day: <https://www.arcflorida.org/developmental-disabilities-awareness-day-2018-quickly-approaching/>

Aktion Club: <https://www.aktionclub.org>

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