



JOSEPH'S JOURNEY

At age 75, Paul Lascelles was just settling into retirement and enjoying wood working, certainly not expecting to be thrust back into the role of parenting a teenager. This is exactly what happened in 2014 when he lost his daughter, Michelle, unexpectedly. Paul immediately filed for guardianship of Michelle's one son, Joseph, who was 19 and diagnosed with autism.

Rather quickly Paul noticed that Joseph's span of knowledge seemed to be much lower than he expected. Paul was aware that as a young child Joseph had been enrolled in the homeschooling program through Vermont's Agency of Education, but what he would soon come to learn was that this instruction ceased in 2007, ending all formal instruction past the third grade level. Paul was himself angry and confused. Why had no one noticed his grandson was not enrolled in any educational program? How was this not uncovered when he went through the court system for guardianship? Did no medical professional in the past 9 years inquire about Joseph's education? Joseph was receiving support services from various agencies within the community, why had his education been ignored? At the same time, Paul saw that Joseph was much brighter than folks seemed to be acknowledging and this made him want to seek answers.

The Howard Center referred Joseph to Adult Basic Learning, the state's free education system. Quickly, Paul learned that what Joseph needed was special education services, services not offered through Adult Basic Learning. Next Paul decided to send Joseph to the Stern Center for Language and Learning for evaluation and instruction. Here, Paul was referred to Vermont Family Network's Family Support Program.

Upon meeting with Martha Frank, a Family Support Consultant with Vermont Family Network, Paul learned that, at 21 years old, Joseph was still eligible for a public education through his district's high school, Champlain Valley Union. Together, Paul and Martha approached the Director of Special Education at the school and were pleased to find everyone at the high school willing to do whatever necessary to get Joseph enrolled with the services he needed to be successful. Last January, 2017, Joseph became a full-time student at CVU and continued into the summer with services. While everything seemed on track for Joseph, he was quickly approaching his 22nd birthday when, by law, he would age-out of the special education services. He needed to remain a student.

Going back to the drawing board, Paul, with the support of VFN, was able to navigate the complicated laws and advocate for Joseph within the school system. Through the support of Martha and the Disability Law Project of Vermont Legal Aid, Paul learned about the protections under Section 504 of the Americans with Disabilities Act allowing Joseph to remain enrolled at CVU with the necessary services until graduation. Because of Paul's persistence and continued advocacy, Joseph will earn his high school diploma and his future looks very bright.

Joseph is learning by leaps and bounds and the professionals who work with Joseph believe anything he wants to do with his future is possible, including college should he choose to pursue that route.

As with many parents of children with special needs, Paul finds himself and Joseph in the center of many moving parts, daily juggling school, the Stern Center to further advance Joseph's skills, and spending time with personal care assistants. Paul credits VFN for empowering him to be the best advocate for his grandson that he could be. As Joseph continues to work on his education, Paul is using his knowledge and advocacy skills to help plan for Joseph's future. Through all of this, Paul has found the time and inspiration to work on an intricately inlaid wooden table for his grandson, passing down not only the support and education that Joseph will need, but a treasured family heirloom.