

- The Mission of an MACL Grad: Transitioning Adults with Autism to Independent Living

Vanessa Eveleth ('23) – The jump from high school and living with your parents to college and living on your own is a massive transition—and can be difficult for people with even large amounts of support and resources. For 87 percent of young adults on the autism spectrum, they never make that jump to independent living, according to a study from the A.J. Drexel Autism Institute. That means that for a state like Utah, which has one of the highest rates of autism in the country, there are many adults who have not had the opportunity to live independently. Kari Bushman (MACL '21), a Westminster graduate student receiving her [master of arts in community leadership \(MACL\)](#), hopes to change that by reframing the story of autism. “My best friend is on the spectrum,” Kari says. “She's taught me a lot about the challenges of being autistic and how difficult it can be to interact with teachers, parents, police officers, and others who don't understand you.”

Kari graduated from Utah Valley University with a bachelor's degree in communication and a minor in autism studies in 2015. Shortly after graduation, she began work at ScenicView Academy, a school for adults with autism. Kari applied for the MACL program two years later because she wanted to support her students at ScenicView in a greater capacity. “Social work programs require grad students to work with populations other than their chosen population, and I didn't want my schooling to take my time or attention away from my students,” Kari says. “I chose the MACL program because the coursework supported my professional work rather than taking me away from it.”

Westminster’s MACL program provided a flexible pathway to advocating change in the lives of autistic individuals, Kari explains—not studying what is, but rather studying what we can create. “I wanted to work with autistic people and make their lives better,” Kari says.

At ScenicView, Kari and the other staff support these students in making that jump from living with their families to living independently and transitioning to adulthood. “Our students are residential,” Kari says. “They live here, they work here, we employ them, and we support them. I call it ‘one-stop shopping for transition.’”

From academic and leisure support to health and fitness, diet and cooking and using public transportation and providing clinical aid to teaching housing skills, ScenicView provides it all to the students while Kari teaches how to live independently. “We break it all down and make housing a classroom experience, but we also have an experiential component to it where our students live here on campus,” Kari says. After living on campus in both traditional dorms and apartments, the program supports the students’ transition into the community as they apply the skills they’ve learned in the real world.

At the onset of Kari starting her MACL degree, she worked with a group of undergraduates at UVU to conduct a statewide survey of individuals on the autism spectrum and their parents. The study collected information on what families with autistic individuals wanted, how big the need was, and what some of the challenges are in the transition to independency. This research served as a stepping-off point in Kari’s advocacy for affordable housing to the Provo City Housing Authority on behalf of these autistic individuals.

A new, affordable housing complex in Provo that has three floors (a total of 33 apartments and a sensory room) allocated and designed for adults with autism is a culmination of ScenicView Academy, the Provo City Housing Authority, and Provo City’s collaboration. “Autistic individuals throughout the city that we've placed with different landlords have proven that there is a need for specified housing—and that they're very capable of living independently if they have the right support,” Kari says. “The 85 North Apartments that we're building in Provo is the fruition of that. By reframing perceptions of autism to highlight the strengths of autistic individuals, it became clear how this building could be beneficial to the city, landlords, and autistic individuals alike.”

For Kari, the MACL program has actively assisted her with preparing for the construction of the 85 North Apartments as well as teaching at ScenicView. “Many of my classes were immediately applicable to my work,” Kari says. “The MACL program helped me improve the quality of life for my students immediately.” David Driggs, one of Kari’s professors, taught her grant writing, fundraising, and working with foundations, which

helped create proposals for financing the apartments (Utah Community Housing Trust is one such organization). “It’s wonderful to have a class where somebody says ‘here, let me tell you how to raise money,’” Kari says. The study conducted with UVU functioned as a market analysis during Kari’s search for funding as well.

Reframing an issue, storytelling, and listening are the most significant skills Kari has learned from the MACL program. Each of these were crucial to Kari’s work with the 85 North Apartments and supporting young adults with autism transition to independent living. “The MACL program gave me the tools and knowledge to create the change that I wanted to see,” Kari says, explaining that she sought to reframe the issue of housing adults with autism, tell the story of their needs while maintaining the individuals’ dignity, and listen to the voices of the population of individuals in Utah on the autism spectrum. “The MACL helped me with how to articulate what I’d like to see happen,” Kari explains. “It’s hard to create change if people can’t see your vision of what you want to build.”

“The MACL program, and Westminster as a whole, helps us remember that everything is connected to everything else,” Kari says. The professors from one class to another teach students that the world is interdisciplinary. Kari was taught that and, now, teaches the same lesson to her students at ScenicView Academy. “The more we realize that we’re all connected and working towards the common goal of each other’s success,” Kari says. “Then that connects everything—all the organizations connect with each other and create change together.”

