

# Program helping autistic adults live independently expanded

Published 10:06 am Sunday, March 16, 2025

By **David Horowitz** (<https://bgdailynews.com/author/davidhorowitz/>)



LifeWorks Transition Academy participants work on independent living skills, such as cooking, on a regular basis with support from staff. Second-year participant Joseph Felkins (left) learns to make pancakes with support from Program Director Hendrix Brakefield in the community kitchen at LifeWorks.

**BY DAVID MAMARIL HOROWITZ**

**david.horowitz@bgdailynews.com**

The local nonprofit LifeWorks for Autism is expanding to commuters its postsecondary academy: a two-year program that aims to help young autistic adults live independently.

Since fall 2020, LifeWorks for Autism’s Transition Academy has married structured, full-time programming with the requirement that participants live on site in what’s known as a living-learning community. With a launch in fall, this newly offered program, “On the Go,” keeps the programming while forgoing the requirement to live on site.

The program is primarily designed for those between 21 and 30 with a formal autism diagnosis, and “the biggest key” is an individual’s personal desire to fully commit to the program with the aim to live independently, LifeWorks for Autism Program Director Hendrix Brakefield said. This, he added, would include the goal of living independently for the long term – from scheduling doctors appointments to finding work and supporting oneself financially.

“The idea is that for five days a week, you get to experience what it’s like to have a full-time schedule, and we believe that that transfers very well into full-time independence at the completion of the program,” Brakefield said.

LifeWorks for Autism came about out of a recognition that, although there are supports for autistic youth through childhood, there’s a dearth of them for autistic young adults, said Harris Pepper, a LifeWorks board member whose child has participated in the program.

“We were able to find right here in Bowling Green plenty of services for my son all the way through high school, and he could have had those all the way up till 21,” Pepper said. “But what I found through working through all these programs and serving on boards was that after 21, there’s nothing there – and that’s where LifeWorks for Autism came from.

“It started out as this fully residential program. From that, we realized that there’s a need for this ‘On The Go’ program.”

Pricing varies depending on numerous factors such as finances and need. Brakefield said he strongly encourages interested individuals to inquire about applying due to time-limited scholarships and introductory rates.

LifeWorks, he added, is motivated to serve program participants without finances being a barrier.

Transition Academy is the nonprofit’s cornerstone program. It was launched in 2020 following the creation of LifeWorks for Autism by community members with a vested interest in supporting the autistic community.

Curricula are personalized and taught in accordance with research-based best practice methods of the learning retention pyramid, Brakefield said. The pyramid ranks learning methods on how well they enable people to retain information – and the academy’s learning, for example, comes far more from practice than lecture, he added.

Curricula focus on getting learners to become independent in the outcomes of “employability, housing & transportation; health wellness, & nutrition; daily living skills; relationships; financial management; adaptability; personal safety; and social & leisure activities,” according to the nonprofit’s website.

Students work through what Brakefield calls artifacts, which are equivalent to worksheets. The staff generally introduce content, make themselves available as supports throughout the lesson, and help guide a discussion where the class reviews the session.

Sessions span an array of activities – from reviewing budgets and bank statements, to scheduling throughout a week, to understanding food plans and shopping needs, to getting exercise, to finding employment, Brakefield said.

A typical class will have around seven to 10 people, and what a class looks like varies, said Noah Thomas, who completed the program last July. A class on finding an apartment, for instance, may entail splitting into groups to collaborate on looking up places online and understanding budgeting and costs, accounting for factors such as splitting expenses with a roommate, Thomas said.

LifeWorks for Autism states that 90% of graduates are employed, a rate multiple times higher than the national average for autistic adults.

Thomas is one of those graduates: Since completing the academy, he has obtained two positions – working in retail and volunteering at a nonprofit.

“I believe it had a huge impact on my daily habits and the way I’m thriving in this nation,” Thomas said about the academy.

Autistic people have an understanding of how the world works that differs from those without autism. Thomas said he strongly believes that LifeWorks helps bridge gaps in understanding, “whether that be like facing fears or trying new things that you feel insecure doing.”

For example, when cooking, Thomas’ autism would present itself in a fear of injuring himself with a knife or burning his hands while using the oven. The academy, through encouragement and plenty of practice, helped him move past those fears, he said.

It also bridged gaps for when it came to obtaining a job: Previously, he would have more hesitation early on when communicating with others, potentially working against the typical aim of making a good first impression in an interview. Again, he said, the academy helped him with that hesitation.

Sara Lamb, a current academy participant, described the classes as helpful.

“There is no way I would have agreed to something like this beforehand,” she told the Daily News, referring to being interviewed by a reporter. “I was a violently shy person before I got here ... Once I started coming here, I made friends. I started coming out of my shell. I’m still kind of shy around strangers, but (it’s) not as bad as it was before.”

Whereas she previously lacked direction in her life, a recommendation by a staff member has led to plans for Lamb to attend WKU in fall for an agriculture degree.

### **‘On The Go’**

As commuters, participants of “On The Go” naturally wouldn’t reap the benefits that come with living on site in the existing, living-learning version of the academy.

Living without a family member or guardian prompts an immediate identity shift from being someone who lives with another to one who lives independently, Brakefield said.

“That is a very big learning opportunity, and not always easy,” Brakefield added. Still, he said, the commuter-friendly version of the program provides ample value.

“If you’re here Monday to Friday, 8:30 to 4:30, you are going to get valuable, valuable experience, skill practice, relationship development – all those things that you would get whether you’re in the ‘On The Go’ or the living-learning community,” Brakefield said.

For Thomas, living on site was an essential element for the program’s success. However, Thomas added, he could see the commuter-friendly “On The Go” program working for others, depending on their individual circumstances.

“I do believe that even if you don’t live on site, you can still get the benefits you need from LifeWorks in order to have the necessary knowledge to show them live on your own,” he said.

Lamb said that having classmates nearby enabled her to interact with others and find the companionship she was seeking.

“It’s really nice, when you get down to it,” she said.

Still, she added, “On The Go” participants would have opportunities to meet others through hangouts between classes, extracurriculars and group messaging.

“They wouldn’t be entirely cut off from the rest of us,” she said.