STUDENT SPOTLIGHT: Mariana Noelle Bertrand

My name is Mariana Noelle Bertrand. I was born and grew up in Crowley, Louisiana and I am currently pursuing a Master’s Degree in School Counseling at Auburn University.

Despite a moderate sensori-neural hearing loss from birth, there was never any doubt that I would receive at least an undergraduate degree. My family is very educationally focused. Although I did not receive any special education services during elementary or high school, my teachers were aware of and made some accommodations for my hearing difficulties. My grades were not stellar until high school, when I became motivated to excel, but I was worried about the transition to college level studies due to my disability and the 7 hour move from my hometown.

When my family and I attended orientation weekend (Camp War Eagle) at Auburn it was obvious that Auburn provided a great program for students with disabilities. Any assistance I needed was available and provided. I was determined not to “overuse” the accommodations that were available to me so as not to become too dependent on them. However, there have been occasions where I really needed the services provided by the program for students with disabilities and they really pulled through for me.

I remained motivated to continue my studies in a graduate program and was delighted to be accepted into Auburn’s School Counseling Program. I hope to use the knowledge and skills that I have acquired through my education at Auburn to assist other students, including those with special needs to fulfill their ambitions and become productive members of our society, especially to be self-advocates for services that will support their goals.
YOUTH LEADERSHIP FORUM
Cody Watts & Carolyn Finley

Each year a group of Auburn University students from the Rehabilitation Counseling Master’s program travel to Troy, Alabama to participate on staff at the Alabama Governor’s Youth Leadership Forum (YLF) for students with disabilities. Approximately thirty-seven high school juniors and seniors, ages 17-21, are selected from across the state of Alabama to participate in the forum because they exemplify potential leadership traits.

Auburn University student, Amy Broxterman states, “YLF gives the delegates an opportunity to stand out in a positive way for reasons other than their disability. Yes, they were all selected to attend because they have a disability, but the attention isn’t placed on that. They were able to focus on finding characteristics they have within themselves that will shape them into leaders and empower them to pursue education and careers.” Activities at YLF are directed toward learning about self-esteem, career choice, and assistive technology through daily group discussions led by Auburn University graduate students and Troy University undergraduate students.

In addition, delegates are given the chance to meet positive influences in the disability community and hear them speak on a panel about their personal experience with self-advocacy and independent living. Delegates are also given the opportunity to enhance their social skills by attending a swim party and dance. One day of YLF is devoted to traveling to Montgomery where delegates tour the capital and have their picture taken with the Governor. A mentor’s luncheon is also held in Montgomery for the YLF delegates; this year’s guest speaker, Kenneth “Maze” Marshall told his story about disability.

After the educational experience in Montgomery delegates return to Troy and participate in a talent show where they step into the bright lights and wow the audience with many exciting and fun talents. Carolyn Finley says, “Being a staff member at YLF gave me the opportunity to work closely with young adults on developing their leadership skills. It was an amazing and inspiring experience to watch them transform in the short amount of time to young people who now are willing to speak up and advocate for themselves.”

YAiT Films TNT Module
Courtney Ingalls

The Young Adults in Transition (YAiT) is a statewide self-advocacy group that consists of smaller groups of students from various high schools all over Alabama who are preparing for their transition into their young adult roles. To contribute in their roles as stakeholders for transition in Alabama, a few students from YAiT met in June to record videos for the Training iN Transition (TNT) online modules.

The group consisted of Davonte, Joshua, and Mary from Opelika High School and Laura from Baldwin County. Alicia Myrick from Alabama State Department of Education, Stephanie Zito from University of South Alabama, April Halverson from Opelika High School, and Courtney Dotson of ATLI who orchestrated the event. Auburn University Collaborative Approach to Training Transition Specialists (CATTs) scholars were also in attendance to record segments and help the students prepare for their roles on camera.

The TNT module will train teachers how to include their students in their transition planning. Imbedded in the TNT modules, the “How to Start Your Own YAiT Group” segment will include a resourceful handbook that is full of information, forms, and activities for launching a local YAiT group. The handbook will be available for consumers to download after Module VI has been successfully completed. The YAiT students seemed to have a great time at the meeting and they all hope teachers will take time to learn more about YAiT and all the beneficial information students and teachers can learn from participating in a YAiT group.
AUBURN THERAPEUTIC REHABILITATION CAMP
Kasey Kashack

The city of Auburn’s Therapeutic Camp is a seven week program held each summer at Drake Middle School, located in Auburn, Alabama. The camp services persons with both physical and emotional disabilities, including learning disorders, Autism, Down syndrome, and developmental delay. The camp was founded on the basis of giving both youth and adults with disabilities a place to go during the summer months. Now in its 12th year, the camp has expanded to include around 50 campers a year. Campers who attend can look forward to fun field trips, swimming, playing sports such as basketball or soccer and arts and crafts among other fun activities. Campers also receive a month of classroom instruction from Auburn University’s Collaborative Special Education students, who complete a month of teaching, counting towards their required student teaching credit.

While this is my second year at Therapeutic camp, it is my first year splitting roles between both staff and practicum student. I can honestly say the experience has shaped me as a person and as a future special education teacher. The camp has changed my perspective of students with disabilities, and has also given me a greater appreciation for what all special education teachers do. While camp meant a lot to me, I also believe it has had a positive impact on every camper, staff member, and student who made Drake Middle School their home for the summer.

Once a camper has been to camp for their first year, they start counting down the days until the camp starts again the next summer. They seem to love everything about camp and often claim they wouldn’t want to go anywhere else to spend their summer. Staff members at camp will come away with one of the greatest experiences of their life. Before I started my first year, I expected to be going to camp to earn a paycheck, but realized that the feeling of earning money is quickly replaced with wanting to be there every day for the campers. Sure, you might leave exhausted - covered in glue and glitter - but you also leave with a sense of fulfillment. And, you cannot wait to get back the next day for more.

Auburn University’s Collaborative Special Education students assisted with camp.

One of several activities included a trip to a wildlife safari.
A familiar face has become the newest member of the ATLI administrative staff - Myra Thomas. Myra found her way to ATLI through a process she compares to “returning home” since she worked in Special Education and Rehabilitation Counseling at Auburn University 24 years ago. In many ways, Myra’s transition into her current position as Outreach Service Coordinator mirrors the transition youth and young adults undergo when embarking on new experiences and careers. She originally began working for ATLI through temporary employment services, working alongside Diane Glanzer. During this time, Myra was exposed to the vast amount of behind-the-scenes preparation for and successful execution of the 2010 and 2011 Alabama Transition Conferences.

Myra speaks very highly of ATLI and identifies the teamwork and mentorship she saw exhibited during these busier conference planning times as indicative of the “quintessential collaboration...” she feels embodies the multiple areas through which the Institute works - instruction, outreach, and research.

Preparations for the 2012 Alabama Transition Conference have already begun at ATLI. Myra is taking an active role in employing new strategies while maintaining close contact with Diane Glanzer. When asked what she regards as some of the positive aspects of planning for and executing the conference, she gave several examples. The process of working with workshop and concurrent presenters is enjoyable and also serves as a professional update on the newest transition developments. One of the highpoints of the actual conference for Myra is the opportunity to match names and faces of the presenters, exhibitors and conference participants she has been communicating with during the year of preparation. Additionally, Myra is aware and proud that the Alabama Transition Conference brings together a wide range of agencies and transition stakeholders from across the state with the common goal of discussing transition services.

Myra’s work as Outreach Service Coordinator also includes an active role in the State Interagency Transition Team and the Local Transition Planning Summit. She is excited for the multiple opportunities to collaborate with other ATLI administrative staff, graduate assistants, and other transition stakeholders. We hope you will join us in a warm welcome to Myra Thomas as she embarks on this next step in her professional career!

“Give It All You Got” is provided by Shanae Heard, a student at Southern Union Community College who aspires to work as a therapist.