Auburn University doctoral student, Eric Peeble’s transition story is an incredible example of resilience and commitment to rehabilitation and higher education. Eric is currently a doctoral student in the Rehabilitation and Special Education Program at Auburn. Eric entered the program in 2008 and expects to graduate Spring or Summer of 2014. When asked about his path to Auburn and doctoral studies, Eric said he believes when it comes to quality educational and disability services “Geography should be no barrier in attaining support and achieving your goals.”

Eric has lived in New Orleans, New York, Ohio, and now Alabama in order to achieve his goals of quality life-long disability care and continued best-practice transition and disability research. Eric’s experiences with transition began from the moment he was born with spastic cerebral palsy – a disability caused by oxygen deprivation to various parts of the brain before birth. This type and the severity of cerebral palsy varies and depends on which parts of the brain were deprived of oxygen. In Eric’s case, the physical/motor areas of the brain were affected while the cognitive areas were not. Eric said from an early age his mother recognized the importance of quality rehabilitative care, in order to insure Eric would develop his full potential, mentally and physically.

Thanks to Eric and his mother’s ongoing commitment to rehabilitation and transition, Eric was able to excel in elementary, middle, and high school, leading to college degrees, a Bachelor’s of Arts in Political Science/Mass Communication and a Master’s of Public Administration from Wright State in Ohio, and to his current doctoral work at Auburn.

Eric displayed his academic abilities as early as middle school, becoming the first student in his school with an Individualized Education Program to be selected for the gifted and talented program. He continues to use his academic talent today while focusing on disability research and a dissertation on increasing access to higher education for students with physical disabilities. Eric’s long-term goal is to use his dissertation study to evaluate university programs for students with physical disabilities, and find ways to improve access and support – not just in the classroom but in extended services and independent living.

Eric is an invaluable asset to his field and will continue to transform student life and disability programs and policy through his heartfelt commitment to “robust” transition outcomes.
The Auburn Transition Leadership Institute (ATLI) was proud to host the 23rd annual Alabama Transition Conference (ATC) on March 4th and 5th, 2013. “The future starts now” themed conference was launched with music selections from a Collaborative Approach to Training Transition Specialists (CATTS) graduate, Angela Harrison, and a special dance from AU Rhythms Dance Troupe. The keynote speech was presented next by special education teacher and renowned author, Mr. Mike Kersjes. Mr. Kersjes spoke about the power of the human spirit and recounting his experience of taking his students to the Huntsville Space Camp, where they succeeded and competed alongside gifted students in the program. A Smile as Big as the Moon, by Mr. Kersjes, chronicles the Space Camp adventure and became an award winning film in 2012.

Following the opening ceremony and breakfast with the conference exhibitors, attendees attended various workshops and concurrent sessions. Over the two-day conference, participants were given the opportunity to choose between 7 workshops, 42 concurrent sessions, three speed-conferencing sessions, a share fair/poster competition, and a transition update. Coinciding with ATC, a mini conference with various sessions was also available for Youth and Young Adults in Transition (YAiT). One of the most attended concurrent sessions was the first showing of the NEW Alabama High School Diploma option, attended by 725 conference participants.

This year’s conference included a new emphasis on mental health and its role in transition. Cinda and Linea Johnson presented Conversations about Mental Health and Disability. In this workshop, they discussed Linea’s journey with bipolar disorder. The duo recently coauthored a book entitled Perfect Chaos to bring awareness to mental health concerns and courage they found in each other through this struggle. Three concurrent sessions and several posters at the share fair focused on mental health in relation to conflict resolution, children as caregivers, school-based mental health, gun-control, media, and sexuality.

The 23rd annual Alabama Transition Conference was a major success and was attended by 833 total individuals, making it the largest attended to date. We would like to give a special thanks to everyone involved. This conference truly marks our collaborative efforts to serve youth with disabilities. We hope to see everyone next year on March 3 – 4, 2014 for the 24th Alabama Transition Conference!

THANKS TO ALL THE VOLUNTEER STAFF!

The Alabama Transition Conference could not run as smoothly without the help of our dedicated team of volunteers and this year’s conference was no exception. Student volunteers helped with set-up, registration, transportation, facilitation of sessions and workshops, among other important tasks. For some volunteers, this was their first experience volunteering at a national conference, while others returned for their second, or even third year! The Institute’s staff was pleased to see a diverse group of volunteers representing multiple majors and concentrations from within the Department of Special Education, Rehabilitation, and Counseling. The enthusiasm and positive energy the volunteers bring to the conference is always welcomed, and the experience of interacting with transition stakeholders from across the state is one of the benefits of their involvement. Thanks again to our great group of volunteers this year – we hope you can make plans to join us next year, March 3rd & 4th, 2014!
Steve Lafreniere has been the Chief of Staff for the Division of Developmental Disabilities within Alabama’s Department of Mental Health (ADMH) for the last two years. Prior, he was the Director of the Office of Children’s Services for the ADMH, and has also worked in the Mental Illness Division of the department as the Coordinator of Children’s Services.

As part of Mr. Lafreniere’s responsibilities he supervises the staff and programs that serve children in his division. He says that “school-aged children will enter their transition years in school prior to entering into our adult services, so it becomes an important time for individuals and families to plan for long-term needs of their children.” Steve states that he believes that it is important for youth with intellectual disabilities and serious mental illness (SMI) to transition from high school to either postsecondary education or employment. “Education and employment are two factors that have a dramatic effect on the supports needed to help individuals in the future...”

The Alabama Department of Mental Health is a partner with Alabama’s Departments of Rehabilitation Services, Education, and the state’s Developmental Disabilities Council to support and promote the Project SEARCH program throughout the state. For individuals with SMI, ADMH supports a group home that serves young adult ages 16-22 and facilitates transitional education needs and early employment skill development of the residents.

His position allows him to engage other agencies with similar missions and goals for Alabama citizens with disabilities. Collaboratively, they can help plan and design a system that offers the best chance of access and success for students. ADMH has also participated in the State Interagency Transition Team (SITT) for a number of years, with Steve serving as the representative. He says he, “Looks for opportunities and resources that the ADMH can bring to the equation and share information to help create a system that benefits the student and family.” Accordingly, he has also presented information about the ADMH at various conferences for transition and special education.

Regarding SITT’s impact on transition, Steve says, “The area of transition is clearly an area that goes beyond the scope and resources of the school system. The multidiscipline approach of the SITT looks at not only the handful of years a student may spend in formal transition but looks beyond the high school years to the agencies and services that they ‘transition’ into.” In addition, “SITT allows us to look at the continuum of issues present in transition and have the representation and hopefully the resources to preventatively address these challenges.”

Steve describes his vision for transition as a, “Robust curriculum and the practical application experiences that prepare a student for the greatest degree of independence and employment they are willing and able to achieve.” He also states that, “The ability to create opportunities, access, and choice are very important to his work.”

Many thanks to Mr. Steve Lafreniere for allowing us to interview him, and for all the hard work that he does behind the scenes to facilitate transition to those receiving and in need of services by the ADMH.
ATLI’S OWN MAKES A TRANSITION
by Joshua Turchan

Transition comes in various forms, whether transitioning from high school to postsecondary school, work, or other life events. One of our own Institute staff, Christina Adams, is embarking on her own life transition milestone – she is getting married!

Christina, an Auburn University graduate, was a special education teacher for eight years before she returned to Auburn University to pursue her doctorate. While teaching in the field, Christina saw first-hand how important it was for her students to receive more help with the transition process. She noticed the need and importance of training teachers to help students become self-determined, and direct their own paths to meet their individual goals for the future.

Christina has worked at the Auburn Transition Leadership Institute (ATLI) for over 2 years, as a graduate assistant, and as the project manager for the Collaborative Approach to Training Transition Specialists (CATTS). As the CATTS project manager, Christina supervised CATTS scholars in community schools. Additional responsibilities of dual roles included assisting in teaching a transition class to undergraduate and graduate students.

When asked to reflect on some of her favorite highlights of working at ATLI, Christina said, “it was the relationships that I have made with some amazing people, from the graduate assistants to the full-time staff, to the students and teachers in public schools, and to the CATTS students that I supervised.” She says as a result of her experiences that she is a “changed person” and will continue to use what she has learned, no matter where life takes her. We know that Christina has been an invaluable part of the ATLI team, and will be surely missed! We would like to congratulate both Christina and Warren on the next transition in both of their lives.

Congratulations!

~Building Brighter Futures~

UPCOMING EVENTS & DATES TO REMEMBER

JUNE
5 - 7 — Transition Leadership Academy
3 — Auburn University Therapeutic Camp begin
17 — State Interagency Transition Team Meeting
19 - 21— AL-APSE Conference

JULY
4 — Happy Independence Day from ATLI
15 - 19 — Alabama MEGA Conference
26 — Auburn University Summer Semester classes end

AUGUST
3 — Auburn University Commencement
21 — Auburn University Fall Semester classes begin
21 — Training iN Transition Webinar IV
26 — State Interagency Transition Team Meeting

NEWSLETTER NOTES
Do you have an interesting personal story to share about the transition process? Our newsletter staff would like to hear from you! Call 334-844-5927.
Archived issues of ATLI Directions are saved at auburn.edu/atli (click on “Publications”).

Guest Editor: Joshua Turchan, ATLI Graduate Assistant