Seth Cason has been described as a social, brave, and sweet young man by many people in his life, including Michelle Walker and Matt Pendergrass, two of Seth’s teachers. Michelle and Matt have assisted in preparing him for his upcoming transition out of high school and have watched him mature. Currently, Seth is a senior at Boaz High School (BHS). He has various accomplishments including being a football player, receiving the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR) Good Citizenship Award by the faculty and the prom prince award, and being nominated for Mr. BHS, all indicating the strong support he receives from his peers. At the upcoming Alabama Transition Conference, Seth will be introducing the keynote speaker, Humorist Jody Fuller. As a part of the conference, he has the opportunity to attend Governor Bentley’s Proclamation Signing Ceremony proclaiming March as Transition Awareness Month, which is one of the most exciting aspects of the conference Seth is looking forward to participating in conference activities, but is most excited about meeting the governor.

Additionally, Seth has a passion for animals, history, and bowling with his friends. He also currently works at Second Chance, a local animal shelter, where he is able to care for stray dogs and has become as Seth describes “someone the dogs can rely on and someone they can trust since they do not have owners.” When looking to the future, Seth hopes to attend a college in his home town, Snead State Community College (SSCC), allowing him to work towards a college degree while still having the support of his family and friends. Eventually, Seth aspires to work as a zoo keeper, so he can have a career related to one of his biggest passions.

Seth is now a vocal and social individual, however, Michelle and Matt can remember a period when he was more timid and refrained from talking to people. Michelle...
...started working with Seth in the spring of his eighth grade year, and Matt has worked with Seth for three years as his teacher and football coach. Both teachers recall when Seth was not willing to interact with people and carried around an Auburn University spirit shaker for comfort. However, as they began to work with him by teaching social skills, self-advocacy, and how to appropriately handle conflict resolution, Seth’s teachers can now proudly say that “Seth talks to everyone; he has never met a stranger.” Matt specifically remembers Seth walking up to a retired veteran that he did not know and thanking him for his service. In Matt’s eyes, the fact that Seth took the initiative to thank the veteran really speaks to Seth’s character. In addition to his social skills, Seth is able to understand communication involving both verbal and nonverbal cues, another skill set that will assist him with transitioning out of high school. Michelle and Matt have worked to assist Seth with post-school interests and believe that by enhancing his social skills and self-advocacy, he will have a smooth transition to SSCC.

During his journey, Seth has had several support systems to facilitate his success. Michelle says, “Seth’s mother has always been his cheerleader and pushed him to reach his full potential.” Responsively, Seth would like to thank his mother “for all the support she gave me.” When asked who his biggest support system at school has been, Seth quickly replied, “Coach Pendergrass. He inspired me to play ball.” Matt has been able to support Seth both inside and outside of the classroom, allowing for support in different aspects of his life. Michelle says that the staff at Boaz High School has been a tremendous support system. Seth has been a part of general education classes and receives minimal accommodations, allowing for a reduction of stigmas related to disability within the student body. Michelle and Matt both agree that they strive to integrate students in both general and special education through a variety of opportunities and both of them work as coaches. At Boaz High School, students receiving special education services are involved in many different after school activities, such as sports teams and clubs. Michelle states, “The students actively contribute to the activities they participate in.” In order to have integrated programs in place, Matt and Michelle have attended trainings, such as the Transition Leadership Academy (TLA), to widen their views on available resources. TLA is the most “beneficial experience I have ever been a part of,” according to Michelle. At TLA, Michelle was able to receive information on resources other schools have in place, while learning about practices to improve the current programs at Boaz High School. TLA afforded Michelle the opportunity to be exposed to new information pertaining to transition. Since TLA, Michelle has implemented the information she learned into her school system as a way to improve transition services for students like Seth.

With all the skills Seth has developed, Matt and Michelle are confident Seth will have a successful transition taking on young adulthood roles and responsibilities. When asked what advice he would give to other people in transition, Seth says, “Anything is possible.” From receiving awards, to playing football, to planning for college, Seth has been able to exemplify his own advice and prove that anything truly is possible when you set your mind to it and are supported in all that you do.
Dr. Margaret Jones is the executive director of learning supports for Montgomery Public Schools. In this position, she works with special education services, student social services, and student supports to ensure all students receive the best possible education. She aims to seek opportunities for the students she serves in order to allow them to be self-sufficient after they exit high school, while additionally providing support to students and their families.

From an early age, Dr. Jones drew inspiration from her mother, a special educator in Tuscumbia City Schools. Her mother focused on teaching transition skills that would assist students in obtaining employment. While addressing her mother’s success as a teacher, Dr. Jones vividly recalls former students of her mothers’ coming back to visit and telling her about the great jobs they had and the families they started. Dr. Jones attributes the success of her mother’s students to the fact that she “did not look at their limitations, but instead looked at their strengths and abilities as catalysts to allow students to achieve more.” After growing up seeing all of her mother’s successes, Dr. Jones entered college and earned her degree in special education from Alabama A&M University. During her undergraduate tenure, Dr. Jones studied under Dr. Freddie Stewart, a professor, who taught not only textbook theory, but allowed his students to obtain practical, real world applications of his teachings. In Dr. Jones’ eyes, Dr. Stewart taught similarly to her mother, in that they both saw potential in the students they assisted. From these two influential people, Dr. Jones developed her own teaching style, in which she did not “want to be a dream shatterer, but wanted to find different possibilities for students so they can have a back up plan.” Dr. Jones then earned a degree in school psychometry, which allowed her to utilize assessments and share the results with students and their parents in order to build upon their interests.

After graduation, Dr. Jones obtained her first teaching job in the Mississippi Delta and was able to work with students to enhance their skills. As a teacher, Dr. Jones assisted her students in obtaining jobs in the local community, allowing them to more practically use their skills and be able to support themselves. After moving back to Alabama, she worked in Huntsville City Schools.

Dr. Jones also worked with the Alabama State Department of Education. In this role, she was able to work with districts throughout the state in addressing the assessment and accountability for students with disabilities. Dr. Jones then worked with the Alabama Department of Youth Services (ADYS). There, Dr. Jones worked with school systems to bridge the gap and assist adjudicated youth transition back into school and assure students’ needs were the central focus during their transition. While she worked at ADYS, Dr. Jones became a member of the State Interagency Transition Team (SITT), which has allowed her to collaborate with other professionals to find ways to assist adjudicated youth throughout the state. Dr. Jones views adjudicated youth as a “viable work source who also need transition services, but also want to work.” SITT afforded her ways to better serve an often overlooked population. Later, Dr. Jones earned a doctorate in leadership, policy, and law.

When looking back at her career, Dr. Jones believes that the highlight of her accomplishments is the awareness she has brought to adjudicated youth. Since they are often times overlooked, she aims to “ensure that they have the same opportunities as all other students going through a transitional period, even though they may not be in a traditional school setting.” Finding opportunities and assisting students with making decisions that improve their future is what continues to motivate Dr. Jones in her profession. For the future, Dr. Jones wants to continue finding feasible options to provide her students with the best opportunity to become self-sufficient individuals. She believes that the field of transition has an “upward trajectory to finding opportunities to push and motivate students past their comfort zone in order to work harder and achieve greater goals.”
D’Vonte is a positive, devoted, and energetic senior at Auburn High School, who is involved with managing the high school’s football team and volunteering at various settings within the local community. A pivotal point in his life, currently D’Vonte is preparing to assume his young adulthood roles and responsibilities. D’Vonte shared how his volunteer experiences at the Auburn Transition Leadership Institute (ATLI), Community Market, Max Fitness, Salvation Army, and Monarch Estates have prepared him for employment following graduation. D’Vonte envisions himself working at a gym or grocery store, in order to assist and educate others. “[Being in an] exercise [environment] suits me and I want to help [people] learn new skills” states D’Vonte, because individuals continuously face changes. He strives to help others make improvements and reach their goals, which has been largely impacted by the support he has received in reaching his own goals.

D’Vonte noted that his teachers and coaches have provided him with support throughout his time at Auburn High School. He credits his coaches for providing assistance by enhancing his managerial skills and strong work ethic when working alongside the trainers and football team. D’Vonte additionally highlighted his teachers as important individuals who have taught him “how to [achieve] a good life and education to become smarter and lead me down the right path. They are like a family to me and I love them very much.”

D’Vonte also credits Auburn University football player, Deon Mix, as being a positive role model and influence while he has trained at ATLI.

Deon is a senior majoring in interdisciplinary studies with a focus on entrepreneurship, leadership, and communication; additionally, he spends many hours a week practicing with Auburn University’s football team and volunteering on the leadership team with Fellowship of Christian Athletes (FCA). As a student and football player for Auburn University, Deon is preparing for transitions of his own. While his careers as a collegiate athlete and undergraduate student are coming to a close, Deon has the ability to both embrace the present and consider his options for the future, including declaring for the National Football League (NFL) draft and opening a Boys and Girls Club in his hometown in Mississippi. Deon offers encouragement to others by recommending that they stay in the moment, “enjoy the process,” and recognize each moment as a “learning experience.” He expressed that his motivation to balance the different aspects of his life comes from following his passions and “keeping God first.” Deon credited D’Vonte as being an additional motivator in his life, by reminding him to continue to push himself daily and “enjoy life.”

Deon has had the opportunity to work with high school students at ATLI by engaging in the community-based instruction program, which helps provide students’ with job skills. Deon has worked alongside three young men since he began volunteering a year ago. He stated, “I have learned more from them than they have learned from me, and it has been a humbling experience.” Specifically, D’Vonte and Deon have positively impacted each other’s lives in numerous ways. Deon shared that D’Vonte’s positive energy is contagious. D’Vonte has been provided with a positive role model —someone with a similar cultural background and interests. Additionally, both value the support they have received, which has encouraged both men to reach out and share this valuable experience with others. Both D’Vonte and Deon highlight their mothers as being their most influential supporters. D’Vonte noted he has been encouraged by his mother to always “work hard, concentrate, and do my best.” Both men feel encouraged to give back to their communities and assist others in their transitions as they have been supported by others and each other. When asked what advice D’Vonte would want to give to those preparing for a transitional moment in their lives, he stated, “I would tell people, they are on their way—live your life.”

Working together at ATLI
Keara Harris, a junior at Auburn High School, has a passion for the arts. She is involved in the school and community theatres, and has performed in *The Sound of Music*, *White Christmas*, *The Crucible*, and *Peter Pan*. She has also written several books, one of which, the first in a fantasy trilogy, is currently published. While she enjoys the performing arts, Keara states that “writing books is by far my favorite activity to do.” Additionally, she is a member of the National Honor Society, the Math Honor Society, French Honor Society, Fanfiction Club, Authors and Illustrators Club, and International Friends Club. She also takes voice lessons and volunteers teaching art. With all of these extracurricular activities, Keara is also a part of the International Baccalaureate (IB) Program, which prepares her for college courses. At the upcoming Alabama Transition Conference, Keara will be singing the National Anthem, an opportunity she is excited about because she will be able to demonstrate her passion for singing.

On top of all the activities Keara is involved in, she is also preparing for her transition out of high school. Keara aspires to attend college in a few years and would like to major in theater or animation, both of which allow her to follow her passions and transform them into a career. In her preparation for college, Keara noted that theater has been very instrumental in developing her social skills. Additionally, she states that “in theater, you have to learn to interact with others, which helps you interact in real life.” Keara believes that learning social skills through theater, along with her classes, has prepared her for her upcoming transition.

When asked what advice she would give to other students in high school who are at such a pivotal point in life, Keara advised, “Do not be afraid to try new things.” Through all of the clubs and groups Keara is involved with, she has been able to be a part of many new activities, none of which would be possible without a strong support system. Keara credits her mother as being her strongest support because she always encourages her to try new things. Overall, Keara is a smart, ambitious student prepared to try new things post-high school.

“Do not be afraid to try new things.”
REFLECTIONS OF THE SILVER ANNIVERSARY
2015 ALABAMA TRANSITION CONFERENCE
Auburn University • Auburn Transition Leadership Institute
Compiled by Leah Kartovicky
Transition Leadership Academy. The Transition Leadership Academy (TLA), is an Alabama State Department of Education initiative to provide a capacity-building experience for local school systems as they develop comprehensive plans to improve their transition process to better support the students they serve. Hosted by the Auburn Transition Leadership Institute, TLA members are provided with opportunities to gain various resources and interact with professionals within different areas that affect transition.

Wilcox County—Makeitha Shamburger, Director of Special Services. While attending TLA, Makeitha’s team was able to collaborate and thoroughly examine the strengths and weaknesses of the transition services they provide. Makeitha spoke highly of the presenters stating, “The presenters provided us with resources and knowledge to creatively and successfully present work and education opportunities to the students we serve.” Learning about various topics, such as social security benefits and community partnerships, became the most beneficial aspect of TLA when it came to enhancing the transition programs in Wilcox County.

After TLA, Makeitha and her team were eager to implement their plan, which has broadened the views of stakeholders within the school system in regards to the importance of a successful transition program. As part of their goal, the principals from schools within the county all participated in and completed modules from the Training in Transition (TNT) series, which further expanded their knowledge of the transition process. Another main goal in implementing their plan was to excite and encourage their students to take advantage of job and educational opportunities that allow for a more successful transition out of high school. Thus far, Makeitha believes that TLA and the various resources given to her team have been invaluable in the effective implementation of the plan without any challenges. For future school systems attending TLA, Makeitha advises that teams should, “take advantage of what the presenters have to say because they touch on all components of transition to ensure success.” Looking back, Makeitha believes that TLA provided their team the necessary resources and leadership skills to improve upon the transition services for the students in their community.

Enterprise City Schools—Alexcia Moore, Special Educator. When faced with creating their transition plan, the task for Alexcia Moore and her team was a large one. She knew that working within a large school district in a rural community had many limitations. Alexcia particularly highlighted securing financial and community resources, as well as time constraints to accomplish their goals as being the hardest challenges. However, Alexcia and her team have remained passionate about the goals they created at TLA. When asked about her experience, Alexcia described TLA as being a rewarding opportunity for teachers and administrators to “come together as a team and create a plan specifically for our system that we feel passionate about and is meaningful for our students.” While there have been challenges in attaining resources, she expressed, “We are a family,” noting the assistance and support the team has received upon returning to Enterprise from the central office, administrators, teachers, and various departments within the schools, which has allowed the team to continue to successfully implement their plan. When inquired about the advice she would give to other TLA teams, Alexcia responded, “Make sure that the [team members] have an administrator that is on board with everything. The biggest help has been the support from the central office.” She also wanted to inspire others to not be discouraged and stated, “Build the rocket ship before shooting for the moon. The little steps are extremely important.” Alexcia and her team take pride in the work they have accomplished from the beginning of TLA until now and look forward to returning in order to continue brainstorming with state leaders and exploring new ways to enrich the lives of their students.
The Auburn Transition Leadership Institute (ATLI) is proud to acknowledge one of our own. Courtney defended her dissertation titled, *Rehabilitation Counselors’ Perception of Transition Programs, Services, and Practices for Youth with Disabilities* on August 31, 2015. More noteworthy, ATLI is proud to announce Courtney’s new role as assistant director and assistant clinical professor at Auburn University.

Courtney asserts, “I will be forever grateful for the opportunities that the Auburn Transition Leadership Institute has afforded me. It is always great to be a part of something bigger than myself. I am appreciative of Dr. Rabren’s philosophy, *whatever you are working on, give it your best effort.*”

*I truly believe in Auburn and love it.*

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**~Building Brighter Futures~**

**CALENDAR OF EVENTS**

**2016 ALABAMA TRANSITION CONFERENCE**

March 7th & 8th | Updates, visit auburn.edu/atli

**MAY**

5 – 7 2016 Capacity Building Institute

**JUNE**

13 State Interagency Transition Team Meeting

15 – 17 Transition Leadership Academy I

22 – 24 Transition Leadership Academy II

**JULY**

11 – 15 2016 Alabama MEGA Conference

20 – 22 AL-APSE Conference

**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 “Resources”).

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