

Westwind

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Paths To Leadership

Over There, Over Here:
Student Veterans on Campus

Facebook: Being in the Know



Paths to Leadership

“Do not go where the path may lead, go instead where there is no path and leave a trail.”

—Ralph Waldo Emerson

When Lori Ciccarelli’s son was born in 1989, she had no idea of the journey about to unfold.

Doctors diagnosed her son, Jeremy, with autism at age three and after several years of “living in denial of his diagnosis,” she says, Ciccarelli’s son began years of therapies and medications. “Back then, there wasn’t much information about autism, but the biggest challenge for us was experiencing the intolerance of others,” she says. The challenges worsened during Jeremy’s teenage years, and Ciccarelli saw her son struggle more socially and emotionally. Her search for alternative therapies, and her experience raising a son with autism, has transformed the 1981 Walla Walla University graduate into a noted advocate for families of autism.

Undeterred by her lack of film production skills, Ciccarelli’s quest to help families inspired her to create a documentary. In 2008, “JJ’s Journey—A Journey About Autism” was shown in Britain at the International Christian Film Festival. The 110-minute documentary will be shown in June at the African Enterprise International Film Festival. Jeremy, now a 20-year-old college sophomore, frequently joins his mom for public presentations and media interviews, including a segment on NBC News. In September, Ciccarelli was featured as an Ambassador of Hope on Oprah’s Angel Network.

“I’m a mom with a mission to provide resources and hope for families,” she says. “I truly believe the Lord has led me in this journey,” she says.

Leaders: Born or Made?

Is it possible that anyone can be a leader like Ciccarelli? What are the essential characteristics of a leader? And how are those characteristics developed?

Answers abound in thousands of books and articles that have been written about leadership—books that, for the most part provoke images of Fortune 500 executives, powerful politicians and military generals.

But careful study reveals that true leadership extends well beyond boardrooms and battlefields—flourishing in schools and cycle shops, living rooms and laboratories, churches and cafes.

In the scriptures, Jesus Himself provides a model for servant leaders, reminding those he mentored in leadership that they would do ‘greater works’ than He (John 14:12).

Empowering others is the essence of the call to service envisioned by Walla Walla University founders in 1892 and it continues today in the university’s mission to foster traits of service, stewardship, and responsible citizenship. These traits, and ultimately, leadership, are about working with others to make the world a better place.

‘You With Your Hand Up’

While you won’t find “Listening 101” or “Problem-solving Formulas,” in our catalog of academic courses, time in classrooms across Walla Walla University’s campus fosters personal and mental qualities that contribute to leadership abilities.

Listening “Leadership is accessible to anyone because at the heart of leadership is the ability to influence people,” says Dan Lamberton, English professor and chair of the humanities program. And he believes a key leadership quality is the ability to listen.

Lamberton models listening quite literally. In his writing classes, he writes students’ class comments in a notebook to be able to recall their comments in future class discussions. He also asks students to repeat their fellow students’ names and comments—as in “As Julian

said ...”—to encourage more active listening during dialogue.

Empathy A person might listen, but can they really hear what’s being said? Understanding the other perspective is something Nancy Semotiuk, associate professor of communications, emphasizes daily with her communications students.

“The quest is to be factual and caring at the same time,” she says. “I always cover the basics—be accurate, be honest, be professional, be consistent and diligent with reporting and writing. But empathy requires more than that. So I teach that there are no black stories, or white stories, or Hispanic or Asian stories. No urban, rural or suburban stories in journalism.

“It might take some extra effort, some extra time to be sensitive, to see through the eyes of another,” she adds, “but that’s where the good stories are. The link between inspiration and integrity is strengthened by empathy. It’s practical, humane and it works for us.”

Problem-solving Making the world a better place begins with a problem. Learning to solve problems, says Pam Cress, professor of social work, takes both rational skills and relationship skills. In the social work arena, relationship classes emphasize the need to understand personal perspectives to problems. “The emotional often comes first in most conflicts,” Cress says. “Resolving conflicts is a matter of listening carefully to all the perspectives of issues and sorting through the alternatives.”

“We design activities and assignments that require students to think,” Cress adds. “I want students to wrestle a bit to find answers for themselves. And I teach this through many methods, including problem-solving in groups, researching and writing a topic paper, completing reflection journals or role playing.” Cress also asks students to “teach back” the concepts they study and do “puzzling,” a technique that deconstructs concepts and then puts them back together in a new way to solve the problem at hand.

Thinking for yourself Leaders are cultivated when they can apply their listening and problem-solving skills, agrees Tom Ekkens, associate professor of physics.

Ekkens points out that the physics department at WWU has deliberately expanded on traditional learning models.

“In many classrooms, material is presented in the book or in a lecture. Then, the student is given an exam to see if they can regurgitate the material. However, the students in our Principles of Physics and Experimental Physics Laboratory II classes are asked to use the knowledge given in class to work on projects that they select,” he says.

“The process of selecting a project, designing, building, testing and presenting is up to the students,” he adds. “Large, flashy experiments have included a trebuchet capable of launching a 20-pound rock hundreds of feet, an electrostatic lifter and a steam launcher. Smaller experiments have included a wind generator and a laser sound transmitter.”

Students make their own decisions and come to their own conclusions with minimal help from professors, Ekkens says. And the success of recent graduates indicates this independent-thinking approach is working well.

Cherished Assignment, Daily Challenge

For 117 years, Walla Walla University’s leadership tradition has been carefully cultivated, and is now emulated by other institutions wanting to empower their students toward life-changing service and responsible citizenship.

“Walla Walla University has hundreds of alumni-leaders who, like Lori Ciccarelli, are making a powerful and positive difference,” says John McVay, president of Walla Walla University. “The pressing needs of church and world call this university to do its very best in evoking the leadership gifts and skills of our students today.

“We’re seeking to answer that call for a new generation of leaders, shaped and mentored in a ‘generosity in service’ inspired by Jesus. With the help of dedicated faculty and staff, this generation of students is building the potential to ignite positive and powerful transformation.” ■

Lead by Example

Autism Ambassadors

Living with autism has been the biggest blessing in my life. I didn't think that several years ago while experiencing many struggles and challenges, but God was at work, looking at the bigger picture. My son, Jeremy, was born with an autism spectrum disorder in 1989. Little did we know that God would use us as pioneers not just in our small community, but by sharing our journey worldwide.

Intolerance has been the hardest part. Junior high years brought episodes of students taunting Jeremy that only got worse in high school. From a distance I would watch the treatment my son endured, treated like he was invisible. He would run up to a group of teens excited to share stories, only to have them turn their noses up as they looked in other directions. It wasn't cool talking to someone who displayed differences.

Every morning we had our family devotional time, reading scripture and saying our morning prayer. As I dropped Jeremy off at school, I would remind him, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me," encouraging him to hold his head high and to be proud of his gifts and talents that God blessed him with. Teenage years are difficult, but add challenges of a disability to the formula. It starts to break the spirit down.

Jeremy had been on medications for 10 years. As he got older,

he could sense his differences. Teenage years brought depression and anger. Jeremy hated being autistic; he didn't like the way his brain worked. He didn't like how his social and emotional development was behind his peers; he could see the gap getting bigger and bigger. He was smart enough to figure this out on his own.

Jeremy was challenged by the other students regularly because they understood his low impulse control. After one suspension from high school, I decided to get on my knees to ask God for a miracle. "Is this as good as it gets, Lord? I can't stand watching my child suffer, and I don't know what to do. There has got to be something better. His medications seem to be working less and less. There's got to be another option, Lord. Speak through his doctor and lead him to your answers."

I then got dressed to see Jeremy's pediatrician to discuss alternative treatments. Jeremy's pediatrician was a godly man at our small community hospital. I sat in Dr. J's office trying to control my crying. "I don't know what Jeremy looks like anymore since he has been chemically dependent for the past 10 years, and I want him off meds." Dr. J shared with me that he had heard positive things about an alternative treatment, neurofeedback therapy. At this point, I was ready to try anything as long as it was safe.

It's hard to put into words the

miracle that unfolded right before our eyes. Neurofeedback therapy is a treatment in which electrodes are administered to the brain in a very safe way to retrain the brain in making new pathways. The lobes in autistic people typically don't communicate; neurofeedback woke Jeremy's brain up, causing the lobes to communicate.

Is this possible? I thought. We all couldn't believe the changes that took place over the next eight months as Jeremy's brain responded quickly. All of his educational team and therapists could not believe the changes. Jeremy started to initiate conversations with eye contact. His face looked different as if to be relaxed. He started to stand up straight with confidence and walked around town with a smile. Tools were kicking in that he had been taught over several years—conflict resolution, impulse control, perspective taking, on-topic conversations and all without medication.

Individuals with autism usually don't do well with abstracts. After neurofeedback, God became more concrete to Jeremy. At 17, Jeremy accepted Christ as his Savior and decided to be baptized.

The Lord put on my heart to share our story. I had no film experience, but decided to document our journey. I bought a camcorder and film editing software program. Each time I sat at the computer to edit, I prayed for the Lord's guidance to show me how He wanted this all to look. It took



Lori Ciccarelli '81, sees her son, Jeremy, off for his sophomore year at Point Loma Nazarene University.

me three years to complete my project and release "JJ's Journey—A Journey about Autism" in 2008. The film is reaching people all over the world through several international film festivals, Oprah.com, and NBC news.

Jeremy has been medication-free since 2006. He is a sophomore in college living independently away from home. He recently received an invitation to be a student representative for his university's student congress and an invitation to join an international honor society due to academic achievement.

Jeremy said to me, "Mom, I'm glad I'm autistic." I asked him why. He responded, "because it makes me special."

I look back on my life and all the pieces fit together perfectly. I asked God how He wanted me to serve Him, and He has made it crystal clear. I don't need to travel to Third World countries to be a missionary. I am a missionary for autism. I know I have made a difference in at least one person's life, my son. The best way to teach is to lead by example; my son is making a difference by speaking out, raising autism awareness. ■