

Clara's Ambition

Clara is probably one of the most animated people you will ever meet. Her expressions, intonations, and body language are so full of energy that you find yourself just watching her at times, desiring even a fraction of Clara's vivacity. Clara, born with Down Syndrome, has always been very certain of what she likes and what she doesn't like. When it comes to what she wants, she is as tenacious as a young child and is as stubborn as an 80 year old man set in his ways. It's this persistence that has always been the fuel behind Clara's drive to this day.

During her last years of high school, Clara's teachers, other professionals involved with Clara, and I began to map out plans for her transition out of school and into the community. Prior to Clara's graduation, we had been connected with DVR, working with them to find a job for Clara after finishing high school. The many months after graduating came with many obstacles that prevented Clara from finding a job that suited her. Soon Clara's life became a series of trials and errors that consisted of vendors placing her anywhere that would hire her. Even though vendors provided much assistance in the whole process such as coaching Clara on interviews and being an effective worker, Clara continued to jump from job to job – none of them lasting very long.

By the time Clara was on her seventh job, we had reached a dead end. It became very evident that pizza restaurants, fast food joints, grocery stores and even department stores just were not meant for Clara. Clara struggled with issues such as adjusting to the work place environment, clearly understanding what was expected of her, and establishing a steady routine of waking up early and going to work. Also, Clara's lack of interest and motivation when it came to tasks such as cleaning, stocking, dish washing, and trash handling reflected clearly in her performance. These struggles caused Clara to end her jobs quickly as neither she nor her employers were fully satisfied.

Another issue was transportation. After high school, Clara and I were responsible for getting her to and from work. Public transportation was available but difficult to use for Clara. It was also difficult for me to provide constant transportation for her as I myself had mountains of work always waiting. Bottom line, Clara was not happy and something had to be done. I wanted so much for her to find a good job where she could put her talents to use and satiate her many interests. I increased my involvement in Clara's job placement by 10 fold and began to actively search for a way out of this rut Clara was in. After all, who knew Clara better than I did? Who knew exactly what she enjoyed, what she was capable of doing, and how far she could push herself? That's when the brainstorming and head scratching began.

Throughout high school, Clara had taken media classes that she had enjoyed thoroughly. This class sparked Clara's interest particularly in photography. Taking pictures was something she did frequently as a hobby. With the help of this media class, Clara was able to dig her hands deeper into the field of photography which opened a new door for

her. This was it! About a hundred rolls of film and blinding flashes later, it dawned on me that Clara's passion for photography had to become more than a hobby. Day and night, she would ramble on about starting her own photography business with her own studio.

Out of love for Clara and not to mention, her incessant nagging, we finally started what's called "Clara's Circle of Support." We would invite friends, neighbors, relatives, and anyone that knew Clara over to our house for brainstorming parties that involved historical amounts of food and talking. As DVR required, we needed to come up with a sound plan to convince them to assist us in building Clara's own business and that indeed, Clara could support herself. We discussed this new idea of Clara's photography business and asked questions such as, "is this realistic? Possible? Suitable for Clara? What kind of things could Clara do as a professional photographer?"

Many meetings later, we had a clear plan to present to DVR as to how we were going to make a professional photographer out of Clara and they finally agreed to assist her through this new career. Ecstatic, I hired a professional photographer to train Clara, teach her the works of photography and also take her out for photo shoots. Clara had already been told by many that she had "the eye" when it came to capturing photographs so refining her skills as a photographer was relatively smooth. Other vendors were also available to teach Clara how to make her photographs into cards, magnets, framed art and similar items that she could sell. She also had to learn how to use various software for creating CD's, labels, mailing lists, and all the other aspects of handling her business. Thanks to her trainer and other vendors, Clara got closer and closer to finalizing the steps to her new business.

I spent countless hours practicing with Clara, perfecting her skills in creating her merchandise. I traveled internationally and nationally, and each time Clara came with me she was able to take photographs of so many beautiful things, all to be used for her merchandise. The next step was marketing, contacting and visiting different shops that would be interested in buying and selling Clara's art. For the most part, they were very receptive and were excited to welcome her as a fellow merchant. Clara's talent landed her in various local newspapers and TV stations, which was great advertisement. Street fairs and similar events were also a wonderful opportunity for her to expose and share her work. Clara did her own share of advertising as everyone she met had to know that she was a photographer and saw her laminated copy of her newspaper article! Very soon, many requests came in from many private and public parties for Clara's work. Slowly but surely, Clara's dream was becoming a reality: her career as a professional photographer was blooming.

Years later, Clara's business has grown and she is learning new things every day about the field of photography. When she's not busy with the Down Syndrome Community Calendar, she travels everywhere to serve as the photographer for many events, weddings, conferences, retreats, the list goes on. Cameras, photo shoots, note cards – all these things are always on her mind and are basically all she talks about! In her mind, she is a know-it-all but of course there is still so much to learn. Her ambition never fails

her and she strives to become an unforgettable photographer. New bottom line; Clara is happy.

Throughout these past years, I have learned how incredibly important it is for parents to be involved. Not just slightly involved, but actively and continuously involved. Of course, we would never be here if it weren't for all the wonderful organizations out there serving individuals with disabilities. They all deserve our applause and we honor them for their efforts. However, in order to make the best of all things, parents have to be in the picture, working closely with these agencies, pursuing the happiness of their children together. Who but the parents can be their child's biggest advocate, their number one fan?