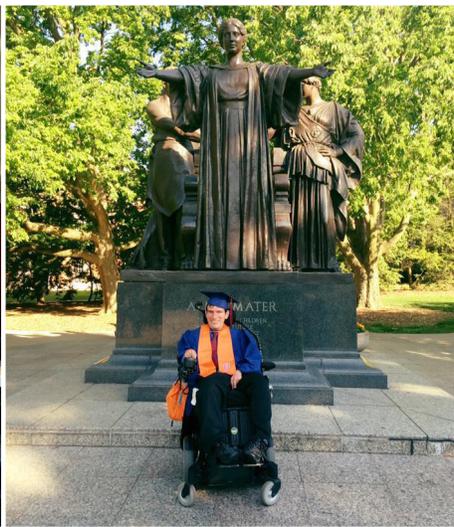


# BECKWITH News

A Newsletter of Beckwith Residential Support Services | Winter 2017

## BEING *Authentic*



# Defining Your Authentic Self

by Susann Sears, Beckwith Director



Since July 2014, I have served as the Acting Director of Beckwith Residential Support Services (BRSS). Transitioning into this role not only has been the most impactful career change that I have had to date, but also the one resulting in tremendous personal and professional growth. This past December, I was officially offered the Director's position. I gladly accepted this opportunity of a lifetime to continue to work with our talented residents, student staff, BRSS and DRES staff, and University Housing colleagues. I consider it an honor to be a part of the University of Illinois' rich residential programming history to students with severe physical disabilities that first began on our campus in 1959.

Throughout this past year, I have been asked about my personal vision for BRSS in moving forward. What kind of imprint or legacy do I hope to leave on the program? Regardless of the role that I have held in supporting and advising college students with disabilities, my overarching goal has always been in supporting the development and preparation for gainful employment of the students we serve.

When I think of my vision, the integral role of authenticity also comes to mind. In its simplest terms, authenticity is defined as who you are at your absolute core, relating to what is uniquely yours that needs expression rather than what you believe you are supposed to do according to external sources and influences. Aristotle once stated, "Knowing yourself is the beginning of all wisdom." There will always be external influences telling you something that may or may not be consistent with your existing values. Therefore, being authentic demonstrates consistency between what one says and what one's behavior demonstrates. Only when we live authentic lives can we bring our whole selves to the table and experience true peace, fulfillment, and happiness. All of those are necessary to live our lives to the fullest.

A great start to understanding authenticity is to know

and define one's own WHY. According to Simon Sinek, your WHY is your defined purpose, cause, or belief that inspires you to do what you do. Understanding our own personal WHY directs individuals to exactly what they are working toward and a sense of fulfillment in what they do.

To define my vision for BRSS, I will continue to assess and identify the programmatic needs of BRSS community members (residents, PA staff, administrative staff) so as to continue to maintain and improve the holistic nature of a program that fosters authentic development, including my own. This journey will undoubtedly require ongoing communication, patience, courage, persistence, and understanding the WHY for the entire community. On a broader scale, necessary stakeholders at the campus, local, national, and international levels will be introduced to this vision. Finally, I will be networking with diverse stakeholders within the campus community and across the globe about accessibility at the physical, programmatic, informational, and attitudinal levels of society for individuals with disabilities, including conversations regarding social justice.

My goal is for these ongoing conversations to continue to cultivate ideas and solutions in order to narrow the substantial social disparity and persistent employment gaps faced by individuals with disabilities in our communities. We must work together in order to translate these same ideas into action and policy. There is no better way to continue to honor the legacy of Dr. Tim Nugent, the founder of the DRES program and namesake of our residence hall.

I hope you enjoy reading this year's *Beckwith News* and gaining additional perspective from the following articles. I look forward to continuing this important work and contributing to our legacy with the BRSS community. I am grateful to those who made this opportunity possible.



## Free to be Me

by Dr. Patricia Malik, DRES Director

In the book, *The Gifts of Imperfection: Let Go of Who You Think You're Supposed to Be and Embrace Who You Are*, Brené Brown states, "Authenticity is a collection of choices that we have to make every day. It's about the choice to show up and be real. The choice to be honest. The choice to let our true selves be seen." Within the pages of the *Beckwith News*, you will find reflections and stories of students, staff, alumnus, and family who have had to "show up and be real" in order to transform themselves into the best versions of themselves for this time of their lives. It is not about being inspirational – it's about being authentic. It is about:

- worrying about your son living nine hours away (yet still letting go);
- volunteering at Crisis Nursery (despite the additional logistics for PAs and transportation);
- moving out of Beckwith to another residence hall (ready to face the many challenges and successes as they arise);
- a new Disability Advocate (DA) feeling apprehensive

- in August, yet realizing in May it was a life changing decision;
- being a Beckwith alum and receiving an award honoring a former Beckwith resident (valuing Beckwith community members unyielding support of each other's goal attainment);
- mentoring first year Beckwith residents (while initially intimidated about not feeling qualified, delighted to see their growth, and proud knowing that you helped);
- giving back to the community as an Illinois alumnus (while prioritizing living a life with his wife that is an on-going story).

These are only a sample of the many stories of past, current, and future Illini who arrive on campus wanting to find their true selves. When they do, our campus community also benefits. We can learn many lessons from those who shared their stories within these pages. May they motivate each of us to find our authentic self so that we may influence our respective communities in equally valuable ways.



Katherine presenting Sarah and Ryan with the David S. Mundy Scholarship.



BRSS DAs, Berlin and Laura, preparing the Friendsgiving Feast!

# Sharing Their Beckwith Experience

by Cole and Stacia Anderson

## The Metaphorical Skydive of Life

by Cole Anderson

I wonder what goes through a paratrooper or skydiver's mind when they jump out of an airplane into the atmosphere. Is it "Man, do I really trust this backpack of nylon sheets with my life?" or more like "AHHHHHHH"?

I don't like free falling in a literal sense. I like to keep my stomach where it is, thanks. Recognize it or not, we've all metaphorically jumped out of a Cessna at 15,000 feet with a parachute that we packed, hoping to avoid hitting the pavement at terminal velocity. Ultimately, what's keeping us safe, what you can trust in the skydive of life, is your own parachute. Not the bazillions of oxygen and nitrogen molecules zipping by. That's scary to most of us! But sometimes you've got to jump into the vast abyss of space, or you'll never reach the ground.

In a less dramatic sense, going to college and living independently is a bit like skydiving. You have to rely on yourself, and less on other people's parachutes and judgments. All stability gets shot out of the plane with you. This is true for most of my friends at the U of I. For some of us, though, this jump is a hard game to play.

It's pretty easy to believe someone else's narrative of your own life when it's both ideologically and physically forced upon you. It's difficult convincing yourself you've packed your chute correctly, when the whole society around disagrees. For most of my life, college was my personal expectation, and I think probably most of my family's also. But societal expectation, and often the reality for those of us with physical disabilities, is far removed from a college degree. Instead, we stay on the ground, where low expectations are normal. The world is astounded that we can get out of bed and meet for coffee. College environments often are structured similarly, meaning very poorly for students like me. I like to say that "Push-plates and accessible entrances make all the difference, but none of that matters if you can't get out of bed." All college

freshmen have a huge jump to make it into college life, and managing a plethora of personal assistants (PAs) is like trying to do it in a thunderstorm.

After being told and shown repeatedly that you can't, you realize you can't rely on anyone's judgment of your ability or who you are. You have to rely upon your own drive and dedication. Thankfully, there are a few schools which have the resources to help disabled students navigate collegiate life. The U of I's Beckwith Residential Support Services is one such program, for which I am grateful. Here, residents are assisted with PA management as needed, instead of managing it alone. This builds confidence that new students can adjust successfully. Easing into something new rather than being dropped at full velocity is ideal. Problem solving is a team effort at Beckwith. We learn how to navigate the complicated logistics manual of existence for living a fully independent life, and that we are not the only ones navigating this chaos. In turn, we teach each other the skills we need through a strong sense of community. It is one place you are told you can pack a chute right. So jump!

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***“Going to college and living independently is a bit like skydiving. You have to rely on yourself, and less on other people’s parachutes and judgments”***

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## He's Just Fine

by Stacia Anderson

Letting go as parents when your child heads off to college can be extremely difficult. You keep your fingers crossed and hope that all the guidance, preparation, and tools you have given your child over the last 18 years will somehow stick or at least be influential. You help your child look for a safe and supportive environment where they will flourish and grow.

We found that environment at Illinois and Beckwith. What we did not anticipate is that our son's choice would be nine hours away from home and that we could not really be there in person to support him. Our influence would come via phone or messaging. We worried about the distance and how he would do away from our assistance in decision-making, prioritizing, time management, conflict resolution, and perspective with his lofty goal to become a bioengineer.

After a year at U of I and Beckwith, we've come to see that Cole will be just fine! While our expectations and vision were important, they were our expectations and vision! Beckwith and Illinois have allowed him to explore and fulfill his own set of expectations and create his own vision for his life. With each day and week, Cole has grown in his path to independence.

- Each time he hired a PA, he learned about the characteristics of individuals that helped him meet his daily needs respectfully.
- Each time he joined, attended, and left a student organization, he did so to meet his needs and foster his interests.
- Each time he planned an outing or dining at a restaurant, he decided whether to struggle with non-ADA compliant entrances and facilities or to support businesses that made customers with disabilities a priority.

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**Beckwith and Illinois have allowed him to explore and fulfill his own set of expectations and create his own vision for his life.**

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We know Cole will develop into an accomplished young man, true to his own beliefs, interests, and passions – to become his own authentic self. College is a great gift!



*Stacia and Cole pondering over an extensive menu.*



*Lauren and Cole hanging out in the lounge.*

# Authenticity is the Best Policy

by David and Jennifer Kuriniec

Those who have had the privilege of being part of the Beckwith family know that its greatest asset is neither the wonderful staff and personal assistants nor the accessible rooms and surroundings, but its community atmosphere. Specifically, the openness and authenticity that permits residents to adapt to, rather than overcome, their disabilities. The support that students and staff provide helps all residents to understand that while a disability is certainly not an individual's defining characteristic, it has an impact on most aspects of daily life. That fact is to be celebrated, not maligned. Students benefitting from the authenticity of Beckwith Residential Support Services should strive to apply a similar philosophy of openness in their lives. As my journey with Jennifer demonstrates, it plays a large role in helping to achieve goals and dreams.



When I began high school, I discovered that I could not enter the building independently because there were no automatic doors. I met with the superintendent of the school district, and asked him to try entering the building using my wheelchair. Two weeks later, the school board approved the addition of a button on the door. Being completely open about my disability helped me to show that the school served purposes beyond education – it was a community center that needed to be accessible to all. Realizing that self-advocacy was incredibly effective, I decided at that point that I needed to go to law school. While an undergraduate at Lake Forest College, I worked very closely with its President to make the campus accessible as well.

Trouble arose during my junior year when sitting for the Law School Admissions Test (LSAT). A section of the exam required drawing diagrams for each problem in order to logically determine an order of events. While I took a prep course with the help of a 1:1 aide and learned fancy names for each type of diagram, that knowledge did not help on test day. Whereas a non-disabled test-taker could see a problem, think of the appropriate diagram, and draw it, I spent the majority of the allotted time explaining how to draw the diagrams rather than actually solving the problems that generated them. I was not allowed to provide the scribe the various diagram templates prior to beginning the test. As a result, my final cumulative test score was significantly lower than expected, threatening a longstanding dream and causing extreme panic.

Confronted with the frightening possibility that I may not be admitted to any law school, as well as the realization that taking the test again would likely produce the same result or worse, I did extensive soul-searching. I could give up on my dream or be true to my goals and feelings. The latter prevailed, and I wrote a letter with each law school application explaining the situation and that the score did not accurately reflect my potential as a lawyer. In addition, I attached letters of support from graduates of the various schools to which I applied. Thankfully, the University of Illinois College of Law helped fulfill my dream.

Upon graduation from law school, I faced a question all people with disabilities face when applying for jobs. Modifying a line from Shakespeare, “to disclose or not to disclose – that is the question.” It’s impossible to know at the outset whether telling potential employers that you have a disability will help or hurt you. Disclosure can remove the potential shock if an in-person interview occurs; however, it may prevent your resume from receiving more than a cursory glance if the potential employer has preconceived notions about disabled people or costs associated with providing any necessary accommodations. Proving that you were discriminated

against because of your disclosure is virtually impossible. Yet, in several instances where I did not disclose my disability, when given a face-to-face interview, the entire mood of the room changed when I entered.

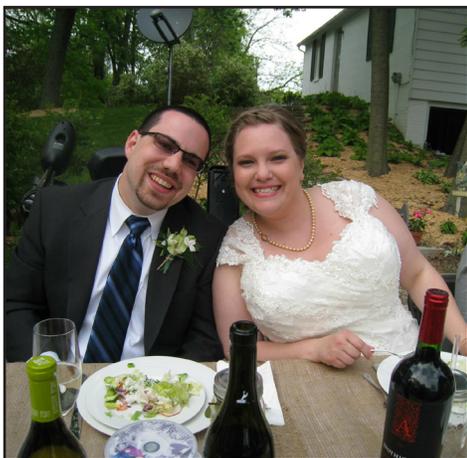
Overall, being open about your disability is the best approach – whether you do so in the cover letter or interview is your decision. Ultimately, you must be able to relate your qualifications to the position, as well as address the potential employer’s concerns. Doing so demonstrates that your disability neither fazes you nor limits your ability to perform the job’s essential functions and should provide sufficient reassurance for the potential employer.

Another area benefitting from openness or authenticity about a disability is relationships. I met my wife Jennifer on eHarmony.com. For some people with disabilities, dating seems daunting. Questioning others’ perceptions of a disability can consume one’s thoughts. The non-disabled person may have questions about living with a disability, but may be reluctant to ask you. For Jennifer and I, meeting online meant that we were uninhibited in discussing how my disability could impact our relationship. In marriage, our key to happiness has been directly stating needs and feelings without assuming

mutual understanding, and communicating without the fear of judgment by the other partner.

That directness facilitated an open decision-making process when I was offered a job in Springfield, Illinois, in state government. Questions regarding minimum requirements for accessible housing, whether to hire personal assistants, and logistics for commuting to/from work were weighed for several days. Jennifer adds that in addressing these questions, she realized it isn’t feasible to plan out every step because doing that paralyzes you. The key is maintaining a willingness to adapt, facilitated from open and authentic communication. Although some of my family were not thrilled with the move, Jennifer’s absolute support and readiness to embark upon this journey convinced me to accept the position.

Fortunately, members of the Beckwith Community live in an environment that fosters openness and authenticity. This philosophy should be employed throughout important aspects of life such as choosing a career, finding your ideal job, and seeking a life partner. Individuals with and without disabilities will attain their greatest successes from their willingness to advocate for and be true to themselves.



*Congratulations Mr. & Mrs. David Kuriniec!*



*Nathan Runnell, Nugent’s Resident Director, chatting with David and Jennifer after their keynote speech during the Sixth Annual Disability Awareness Program.*

# A Year at Beckwith...



Paige, Katherine & Susann: The end of an era.



One of the DAs interactive bulletin boards in which members of the Beckwith Community contributed suggestions.



Hannah and her PA Anna taking advantage of the access to the ice!



6th Annual Disability Awareness Program = Diversity



Kathleen enjoying swimming with PAs.



Adam and Katy taking a little break from the semi-formal dance.



*Quite the turnout for the annual ice skating party at the U of I Ice Arena.*



*Selina and Avi taking a study break to join the BRSS Community at the semi-formal.*



*Halloween luminaries aglow.*



*Residents enjoying University Dining Services Sesquicentennial Celebratory Dinner.*



*Jordan, Mer & Pat getting caught up after the 6th Annual Disability Awareness Program.*



*Chelsey and Natalie after being awarded the John S. Fine Scholarship from Paige & Jeannette Elliott, DRES PT.*

# True Calling

by Ryan Wilson



It seems weird to say that I feel that I found my true purpose in my last semester of living in Beckwith Residential Support Services (BRSS). It feels like just yesterday that my parents and I were nervously preparing for life at the University of Illinois. I was on the verge of entering previously uncharted territory, and we wanted to make sure everything went smoothly. On our first move-in day two years ago, I was excited. I felt ready to immerse myself into new experiences and a new level of freedom. When the time came for my parents to leave, we shared a couple of hugs, my dad gave me a fist bump, and that final farewell as they departed was filled with watery eyes. Everything began to settle in for my new reality from that point forward. My parents were no longer immediately available to help me manage my schedule or help me use the restroom. It was different for me, and I know it was for them, too. But then I became introduced to the residents, personal assistants (PA), and administrators within Beckwith. It did not take me long to realize I had a second family.

Now, as I have transitioned out of Beckwith, my family and I cannot help but be in awe of my experiences.

Beckwith provided me with a unique platform for academic, professional, and personal growth. It gave me a new sense of confidence in my own work and within myself. From there, I began to literally spread my wings into the world. I have had the pleasure of traveling to Portland, OR; Whitewater, WI; and Nashville, TN. I have become more involved with the wheelchair basketball and track teams, and I have had a tremendous opportunity to write for the International Paralympic Committee.

I am honored to receive the David S. Mundy Scholarship, “given to students in pursuit of achieving independence and responsibility for one’s self,” which has been a direct result of my recently acquired skills and confidence. Such experiences have not only taught me about different cultures and people, but also about myself. I have learned how to be my own advocate and speak up for others and for myself. I have learned how to capitalize on my so-called weaknesses and, as one Illini Paralympian says, maximize my potential. I look forward to carrying these characteristics to the next steps in my life as I continue to grow.



*BRSS community enjoying the "1st Annual Foley Fest Tailgate."*



*Ryan, the newest "Flying Illini" enjoying the annual skating party at the Ice Arena.*



## My Authentic Self

by Sarah McCabe

I am honored to be a recipient of this year's David S. Mundy Scholarship, recognizing the pursuit of personal independence and responsibility for transitional disability management. I believe that authenticity is central to my diverse independence, including transitional disability management. When I came to Beckwith as a freshman, I had never hired personal assistants (PAs) or done many of the things that I now enjoy daily. My transition took practice, but was guided by the patience and kindness of so many as well as my motivation to grow. Six thrilling semesters later, creating detailed schedules is normal. They function as a framework that is decorated with the fun, challenging happenings of everyday life. Maintaining this structure, I can engage in activities that allow me to show my authentic self and discover new sides of myself. Highlights include interning for ATLAS, blogging for admissions, taking design classes, being a BRSS Director's Student Advisory Committee member, daily physical activity, and being a mentor/TA to first-year Beckwith residents. I love being a mentor, as it is such a rewarding and insightful opportunity. It is amazing to

see the first year residents rise to their challenges, have fun, and be their authentic selves. As a mentor, being my authentic self is especially important as it requires regular communication with a variety of people. Authenticity is essential for true, effective communication.

More than anything, mentoring, my classes, and extracurricular pursuits remind me of how lucky I am to have so many people inspire and motivate me daily to set new goals. I am grateful for the myriad of friends, family, and university faculty and staff who at one moment or another helped a big or small light bulb go off. The combination of these moments (or stretches of time) that give me fresh insight into how I can be a better, more authentic version of myself have helped me enjoy myself and be more productive than I ever imagined. While I do not exactly know what the future will bring, I know that I will carry with me forever the many lessons learned through U of I and the wonderful Beckwith community. The Beatles sing, "nothing you can do, but you can learn how to be you in time." It may not always be easy, but I will strive to do so in the most authentically joyful way that I can.



*Life is good!*



*Sarah on her first adventure as a mentor with the first year residents.*

# My Ultimate Dream

by Kathleen Downes



When I started out on my grad school adventure, I felt honored to have the chance to pursue my second degree at a university that has given me so many wonderful opportunities. I still feel honored every day.

While I have been blessed to learn, grow, and begin building my dreams at an extraordinary school like Illinois, my ultimate dream is bigger than “me.” I hope that my presence here, other than giving me a degree, will give someone else with a disability the knowledge that going to college, living in a dorm, and rolling across a massive campus in a squeaky power wheelchair is possible.

I am touched to be the recipient of this year’s Matthew Allan Odelius Award for leadership and academic success. Juggling five classes, PA scheduling, and a volunteer job at the Crisis Nursery has not been easy, but I enjoy being as active as possible. The University of Illinois always keeps me busy!

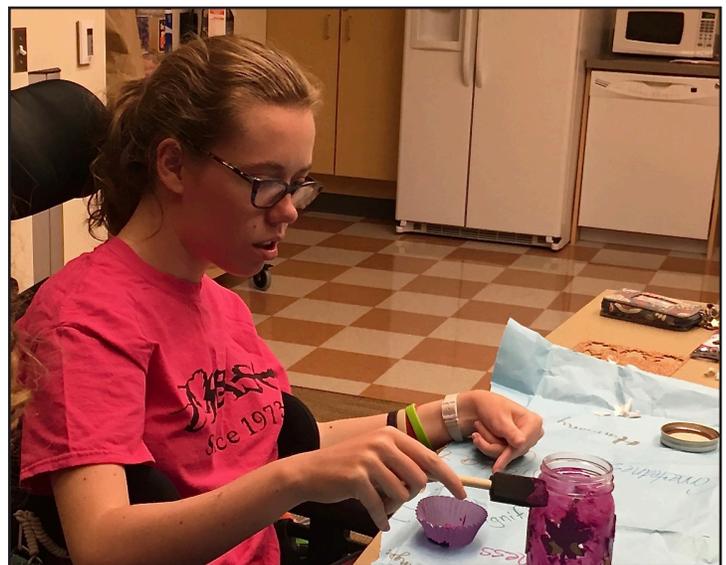
As I reflect on this year’s theme of authenticity,

I’m thinking about how important it is to be “real” and honest. And the “real” truth is, nothing I have accomplished here has come to me without the support of others. Isaac Newton said, “If I have seen further, it is by standing on the shoulders of giants.” While I will be the first to joke that I won’t be “standing” anywhere, the sentiment perfectly captures the truth that in our community, we need each other to reach our goals.

I am grateful to everyone in the Beckwith community for always keeping me on their shoulders as I work toward becoming a social worker. You motivate me, make me laugh, and remind me that we don’t win in life when we show the world that we can do everything on our own. We win when we realize that victory requires a lot of giants. With the year drawing to a close, I hope all of you know that I have seen further because of you. That said, hold tightly to your own dreams and remember that there is plenty of room on my shoulders.



Susann presented the Matthew A. Odelius Award to Kathleen.



Kathleen enjoying Laura's Halloween luminary project.



## As One Door Closes... Another Opens

By Susann Sears, Beckwith Director

**O**n September 28, 2017, Katherine's 20 years of service were celebrated by members of our Beckwith and DRES family, University Housing, and her own family and friends. I thought it was fitting to share some highlights of Katherine's career and a photo montage commemorating this event.

Katherine's commitment to Beckwith was never a question. Since 1997, from our stand-alone, two-story building on Second and John St. or since 2010 from Nugent Hall, Katherine has experienced the evolution of residential support services for college students with disabilities as well as left her imprint on it, continuing Dr. Nugent's legacy.

In sum, she has supported 157 students learning PA management skills, while increasing the PA staff from 20 to 132! Since the fall of 2010, she has assisted in the training and vetting process of approximately 200 PAs. Moreover, one of her PAs was the runner-up for student employee of the year, and another recently was an honorable mention.

In July 2012, she traveled to Washington, DC, as part of Illinois' contingent to the Smithsonian Folklife Festival celebrating the 150th anniversary of the Morrill Act of 1862. She was the recipient of the Applied Health Sciences Academic Professional Award in 2016 and served

as a member of the Chancellor's Committee on Access & Accommodation. Finally, Katherine's networking led to BRSS becoming part of the UIC College of Nursing clinical rotation.

Our motto, "Making Important Choices... Leading Empowered Lives," is timeless, regardless of what transition we are experiencing. Our community extends its best wishes to you, Katherine, as you experience much love, laughter, and excitement with your first grandchild!



*BRSS live-in PAs checking out Katherine's Memory Quilt.*

*Brad Hedrick, DRES Director Emeritus, and Pat Malik, DRES Director and former BRSS Director, at Katherine's retirement party.*

## Mutual Gain

by Laura Misulonas



When I applied for a job at Beckwith, I knew I wanted to work in a community that I was passionate about every day. Since high school, most of my jobs have involved working with individuals with disabilities, primarily individuals with autism. So assisting college students with physical disabilities was a new, exciting, and completely different opportunity.

In the past three years, Beckwith has surpassed my greatest expectations. Through my work as a Floater/ Personal Assistant (PA) and a Disability Advocate (DA), I have grown immensely as a professional and an individual. During the major changes that occurred throughout my college career – changing my major, moving to new apartments, and a quick decision to apply to graduate school – Beckwith has remained a constant in my life.

Reflecting upon this year, I realize how much Beckwith has impacted my identity, yet how I have also shared my personality, strengths, and values with the community. Positivity, openness, and friendliness were just part of what I gained from these personal connections. I was able to sense a productive way to

support the residents, PAs and Floaters as they sought to define their values and identity, and to contribute to the admin team's shared vision for continually improving the BRSS program.

Each interaction was unique. Sometimes the best solutions were simple and well known. Others were, new to everyone. I learned even more about being empathic and how listening is often the best means of supporting individuals. I loved being able to incorporate my interests in planning programming events while trying to integrate the community's interests as well. These traits are all integral to my success as a future social worker.

When I began DA training in August, I had some anticipatory anxiety about transitioning from a PA to a DA. Looking back, it was pretty effortless. I was able to maintain old friendships, foster new relationships with new students/PAs, and mature within my position and responsibilities. Transitioning into my career, I am forever grateful for my time at Beckwith. I hope to incorporate the strengths I've learned into my future endeavors and continue being authentic.



*Aly & Laura enjoying S'mores at the bonfire.*



*Welcome session for new students and families to meet the BRSS DAs, Live-in PAs, TAs/mentors and professional staff.*



## *The Greatest Decision of My Life*

*By Berlin Schlegel*

This idea of authenticity has been a recurrent theme throughout my time here at Beckwith. It started off simply as having open communication as an administrative team member and has grown into having an openness of self in a larger sense. For me, authenticity is largely being true to yourself. The decisions we make provide a reflection of ourselves and as writer and painter E.E. Cummings once said, “It takes courage to grow up and become who you really are.”

Choosing to come to the University of Illinois has been one of the greatest decisions of my life, and having the opportunity to serve as a disability advocate (DA) is something I will forever be grateful for. When I first applied for the position, I didn’t realize the impact it would have on me. The past year has certainly been filled with many challenges, but in contributing to this incredible community, I have learned a great deal about myself and who I want to become.

I feel privileged to be part of a program with such a prodigious history, working alongside people who are

so passionate about what they do. Seeing the dedication of Susann, Paige, and Katherine to their work has been truly inspiring. Having the support of Laura is something I couldn’t possibly have done without. And getting to know all the residents/PAs has been one of my greatest pleasures.

I hope we can all look back on this year and recognize the growth that each of us has experienced and remember what we’ve shared.

Being here has opened me up to

a whole new perspective and I think that is what being authentic is all about – baring your soul to the world and letting your true colors shine.

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*I feel privileged to be part of a program with such a prodigious history, working alongside people who are so passionate about what they do.*

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*BRSS first-year residents, DAs, Live-in PAs, TAs, and professional staff.*

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