

AARON KIRSCHENBAUM - August 2018

When Achieving Success Needed Extra Support, Merritt Came Through for This Graduate

When Aaron Kirschenbaum walked across the Paramount Theater stage on May 24 and received his Associate of Arts Degree in Child Development from Merritt College, it was not only his parents and grandparents in the audience who were thrilled to see him reach his goal. A team of instructors and counselors who had worked with Aaron at Merritt to achieve his dream were in attendance and cheering just as loudly.



New graduate Aaron Kirschenbaum with his proud counselor Mary Ciddio.

Two years earlier Aaron was a newly arrived freshman having recently graduated from a private high school in Lafayette designed for students on the autism spectrum. With a goal of going to college to learn to teach pre-school children with special needs, Aaron chose Merritt College for its excellent Child Development Program and its highly reputable Student Accessibility Services (SAS) program to help students who may need some extra support to succeed.

It turned out to be a wise choice. Through a team effort, with Aaron at the helm, he was able to graduate and will soon be using his education and experience to help others.

“Aaron came to us as a very conscientious student with a desire to learn, and he did very well,” says Christine Olsen, longtime instructor and chair of Merritt’s Child Development Program. “It wasn’t until toward the end of the program when he took the required Practicum Lab that we had some concerns. As part of the class, we watch for specific behaviors and evaluate the students on them. We noticed that Aaron was having some difficulty recognizing tactical situations with the children and reacting with appropriate responses. Though he was doing well in other parts of the class, he needed to excel in all the required skills to pass.”

So Christine met with Aaron’s SAS counselor, Mary Ciddio, and his academic case manager, Stina da Silva, from College Internship Program (CIP), a Berkeley-based agency that teaches skills for independence to students with learning, some of who are pursuing college degrees. Together they set up a plan to overcome his challenges so he could pass the class and graduate.

“Aaron is a very visual learner,” says Mary, “so we decided that we could possibly help him learn better by having him see his own errors. We learned that the department uses small video cameras to help observe in the lab. So we recommended that Aaron look at the recordings of himself and role play with both his instructor and his academic case manager to learn and repeat successful responses to situations that occur in a pre-school setting.”

The camera, primarily used to observe student teachers, proved to be invaluable in helping Aaron, thanks to the technical support of Instructional Assistant Bonnie Rippberger, who set up cameras in each of the learning stations. The team then moved on to help Aaron meet some of his other challenges: To maintain focus while watching the children, Aaron began setting the alarm in his phone for every 90 seconds which helped keep him aware; to quicken his pace in meeting the required 30-minute timeframe to set up a play area, he practiced and

received feedback; to respond correctly to health and safety situations, Stina came to campus to view the layout of the lab space and role-played with Aaron weekly at CIP every possible safety hazard and what the correct response would be.

“This was a first for me because typically I don’t come to the school and get involved with the instructors,” says Stina, a former middle- and high-school teacher. “I wasn’t sure how these different strategies would work. But Aaron continued to improve and became really excited about his progress, and his parents were thrilled as well, so it was a win-win. It was great to try an alternative approach to the typical plan of action and see it work out so well.”

Christine reflects on Aaron’s success and gives him credit for doing what needed to be done to meet the challenges he faced.

“We were so excited to see Aaron reach his goal. It could not have been accomplished without the commitment and dedication of this team—and the determination of Aaron himself who made it happen,” she says. “This is what teaching at a community college is all about. It makes it very rewarding at graduation time. We’re there to give them hugs because we know what they went through.”

Adds Counselor Mary Ciddio: “Changing lives and reaching goals is what we want for all our students at Merritt College. We use the team’s creativity to solve problems and we thank our students and their support network for providing the motivation to persevere to reach completion.”

As he begins his career, Aaron is very grateful for the help he received to be in a position to pursue his dream. Having come close at one point to withdrawing from the program when he got discouraged, he’s glad he persevered and received his degree.

“I never thought I would get an AA degree, maybe just a certificate, so it was a huge accomplishment to achieve that goal,” says Aaron. “There were some challenges, but I was able to work through them because of my instructors and counselors who motivated me to do better and to go further. I’d like to thank them all. It’s been a great experience at Merritt College!”

—*Susan May*