Tales of Triumph
Volume 2
Stories of lives changed thanks to your support
VersAbility Resources offers support to people with disabilities that helps them live, work, and thrive. Our programs begin at birth and last a lifetime, because we know that the hopes, potential, and talents of people with disabilities are limitless.

You will find many examples of this as you read through the following “Tales of Triumph,” and we believe you will be inspired by these stories of extraordinary people and their accomplishments.

We’ve proudly been supporting people with disabilities and their families for 65 years. We’re truly grateful for your help, which makes accomplishments such as the ones described here possible.

**You transform lives.**
**Thank you for supporting VersAbility!**

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**Our Mission**

VersAbility Resources supports people with disabilities in leading productive and fulfilling lives.
When Cody started coming to VersAbility as a high school student through VersAbility’s Transition to Work program, he wasn’t looking for a career or planning for his future, he just wanted to make money. He quickly learned the ins and outs of electronics recycling and took an interest in helping around the warehouse. A few days before the end of the school year, he asked if he could work at VersAbility full-time.

His supervisor, Marse Wideman, saw Cody’s potential and asked him to take on more responsibilities by becoming certified to drive a forklift and mentoring other employees. “Giving Cody a leadership role has changed his attitude. He has learned to be a person others can rely upon,” says Marse.

This young man who started at VersAbility with no future goals or dreams now has a big dream: to earn his Commercial Driver’s License (CDL) and become a truck driver with his brother. There’s just one thing standing in his way. In 2017, Cody shared with VersAbility leadership that he didn’t know how to read. VersAbility’s Chief Operating Officer, Jerry Twigg, researched programs and helped Cody find a tutor to teach him.

“Cody was given the opportunity to learn to read and he immediately said yes,” said Marse. “He goes to Peninsula READS twice a week and takes advantage of all of the tips they give him so he can better himself. He knew it would be a lot of work but he sees the benefit of it and has dedicated himself.”

Now when you see Cody walking around VersAbility with his earphones in, he isn’t jamming to music, he is listening to the alphabet. Cody receives intensive one-on-one support twice a week and he says it has been challenging, but he refuses to quit.

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Supervisor

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Cody: Saying yes to every new opportunity

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When Debra Vance and her husband learned their new baby boy had Down syndrome, they knew their faith and love would guide them, but they understood they would face many challenges.

Ethan was born three months early and, in his first months of life, endured more testing and surgeries than most people experience in a lifetime. Ethan was a fighter though and his parents were strong advocates for him.

The Vance family was able to bring Ethan home when he was five months old and they were joyous, but nervous about Ethan’s complex medical needs. Ethan would need a guiding hand to reach his developmental milestones. Debra wanted a full, rich life for her baby boy.

Ethan’s pediatrician connected the Vance family to VersAbility’s Early Prevention and Intervention for Children (EPIC) program.

“We were very overwhelmed, but thankfully the EPIC team took us step-by-step,” said Debra. “At the time, we were more concerned about his eating than about him developing physically.” After working with the EPIC team and therapists, Ethan became a voracious eater.

“What EPIC does is give a glimmer of hope,” Debra explains. “They give baby steps for you to take on today, because that is all you can think about – today.”

“Not only did EPIC help Ethan eat on his own, but they helped with preparing him, and us, for preschool. He wouldn’t be where he is now if it weren’t for them coming to my home and teaching him, as well as us, what Ethan’s future has in store. They also connected us with community resources and reassured what we already knew, that our little boy is truly a superhero!”

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Ethan: Living “Joy”fully

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- Debra Vance
  Ethan’s Mom
Follow Ethan’s “joyful” journey on Facebook by searching “En’JOY’ing Ethan.”
Laurie: An Advocate, Volunteer, and Leader

Laurie Kangas is a person of great strength and confidence. It hasn’t always been that way though. When Laurie moved from New York to Virginia, she struggled to find a place that made her happy and gave her a sense of purpose. Her Case Manager suggested they tour VersAbility’s Envisions Day Support program in Hampton and, after the visit, Laurie felt she had found her place.

Laurie has taken a leadership role in the Envisions program by guiding the program’s volunteer activities. Volunteering and giving back to others is one of Laurie’s greatest passions. She and a group of her peers visit the Downtown Hampton Child Development Center weekly to read to the children. She also contributed to a group project donating knitted octopi (a form of therapy) to premature babies and is trying to coordinate a project to make beanies for newborns.

Laurie is known for her giving heart, which extends to her friends in the Envisions program. She encourages them every day to be better and stronger people. She has become a strong advocate for herself, standing up for what she needs/wants, and encourages her peers to advocate for themselves.

“My favorite part about being at VersAbility is coming in every day and telling each person, ‘Good morning. It is going to be a great day.’”

- Laurie Kangas

Want to give time to teach Laurie and her peers computer skills or volunteer in another way?
Contact VersAbility at 757.896.6462.
Like many high schoolers with disabilities, Jacob Casas didn’t know what the future would hold. Struggling academically, he wasn’t even sure if he would receive a diploma. A serendipitous knock on his classroom door and a conversation with a Job Coach from the Department of Aging and Rehabilitative Services (DARS) led him to an interview with VersAbility’s Contract Manager at the Naval Weapons Station Yorktown Galley.

“I met Denton Brandy and he showed me around and talked about the position,” said Jacob. “I told him ‘I am not shy about hard work.’”

Jacob accepted the position at the Galley, where he and his coworkers help prepare, serve, and clean 550 meals a day. This is a fast-paced job and Jacob worked hard to develop his leadership skills, becoming a mentor to many of his coworkers.

While Jacob liked his job at the Galley, he was inspired by a family member to pursue a career in law enforcement. He began the long and difficult process of joining the Virginia State Police.

“My managers at the Galley encouraged me and were understanding and flexible with my testing schedule,” says Jacob. “They wanted me to achieve my dream.”

Jacob passed every battery of tests seamlessly. But during an eye exam, his dreams took a devastating turn: Jacob was diagnosed with glaucoma in both eyes. There was no way he could become a member of the force. Jacob tried to remain strong, but felt that he had let his team at VersAbility down. His managers quickly reminded him that he had made it through the toughest parts of the police training and he should be proud of himself. Jacob took this to heart, deciding not to let this roadblock stop him. He dedicated himself to growing in his position at the Galley and was promoted to Team Lead.

“Jacob has been through a lot, but he never lost focus,” says Denton Brandy. “He is dedicated and motivated and is a strong leader. He knows he has a home with VersAbility and is motivated to do the best job possible for us.”

Jacob’s can-do attitude has made him an exemplary leader. Even though he had to adjust his dreams, he still strives to make a difference in the world by serving others.

“I am not shy about hard work.”
- Jacob Casas

“Jacob has been through a lot, but he never lost focus. He is dedicated and motivated and is a strong leader.”
- Denton Brandy
Contract Manager
When high school student Jonathan Armer enters a room, you know it. He is full of life and greets everyone with a resounding hello.

Jonathan has Fragile X Syndrome, but his mom, Lori Armer, never wanted his disability to limit him. She made sure he was enrolled in VersAbility’s Transition to Work program to develop work skills. Jonathan started working at VersAbility two days a week, but when his mom saw how much his skills improved, he moved to four days a week.

Jonathan rotated through several jobs as the team worked to find a good fit. One day they took him to the area where a team of employees with disabilities cleans heavy fixtures for Arconic, and Jonathan was hooked. He loved being able to use tools to clean the large metal parts and enjoyed being in the industrial atmosphere.

Just like that, Jonathan was transformed. His outbursts stopped. He walked taller and lost over 20 pounds.

“VersAbility made Jonathan grow up,” says his mom. “He has not had a physical meltdown in over a year and I attribute that to VersAbility. Jonathan has a purpose and something to do. He loves bringing home a paycheck and is so proud to be working.”

Jonathan’s new skills have carried over to home. He has taken on more responsibility around the house, helping with the laundry and trash. “Jonathan uses a hammer at work and loves it. One day, he grabbed our hammer and went under the sink and started hammering away. The only problem was the sink wasn’t broken!”

Jonathan does not have a Waiver and he’s close to graduating, which means he’s no longer guaranteed services in the Commonwealth of Virginia. His mom says, “When Jonathan finishes high school, he’ll be at VersAbility. We will pay ourselves until he gets a Medicaid Waiver.”
Hello Team Jonathan!

I have not emailed in quite some time because everything has been going GREAT!

VersAbility has been the BEST thing for Jonathan and he is doing very well!

We had a slight emergency this past weekend, as our bathroom floor had to be replaced and Jonathan, ON HIS OWN, asked to help his dad tear up the old floor!!!!!! I have to give you guys credit as this team has made this possible!

Now, as you can imagine......when a father has a son, these are the moments he looks forward to. For us, my husband works construction, so he has always wanted Jonathan to join him in fixing things around the house, as many fathers do.......WELL, it took 20 years, but Daddy finally got that moment. Not only did Jonathan help tear it up, but he carried the buckets of old tiles out to the trash.

Many people cannot understand the pure JOY in this moment, but I knew TEAM JONATHAN would and I just want to thank you all for this success!

I was in DC last month meeting with Senator Warner, Senator Kaine, and Congressman Scott’s team. I could not express to them enough about Denbigh High School and VersAbility and the positive influence you guys have made in Jonathan.

Here is the BIGGEST Success......we have NOT had a physical meltdown in over a year!!!!!!

We still get mad, we may slam a door or say a cuss word or two......BUT NO PHYSICAL AGGRESSION!!! Jonathan started hitting me when he was 2 years old, and as you can imagine the bigger he got, the worse it got. He has sent me to the hospital, we have had police called out, so to go a year without getting physical is MAJOR and I am so PROUD of how far he has come!

I just can NOT express enough how grateful I am for the BEST team! You all have Jonathan’s best interest, you all have watched him grow and I just want to thank each of you for his success!!!!!!

- Lori Armer

Why supports for high school students are so important

People with disabilities in Hampton Roads face an unemployment rate of 69%, and nearly 200,000 adults in Hampton Roads have a disability (U.S. Census, 2016).

In 2016, 53% of students with disabilities in Virginia graduated high school with a diploma (Virginia Department of Education, 2016). These graduates then sought to enter a workforce where unemployment for people with disabilities is near 70%. Many finish school but fail to make the transition to a work setting due to a lack of funding and support systems.

Our children deserve better. Visit versability.org and support our advocacy efforts.
Sheila Jackson takes her job seriously. She leads the custodial team at VersAbility, making sure everything shines, and her team exhibits the same high standards she holds for her work.

“I make sure everything is clean and wiped down and I re-check it in the afternoon,” said Sheila. “I love the work I do and they like having me here.”

Recently, Sheila noticed staff in the Envisions Day Support program using visual supports for individuals with disabilities, making communication possible for those who couldn’t read or were non-verbal. Sheila spoke with staff about implementing visual supports throughout the building. With her supervisor, Sheila developed a cleaning log for the bathrooms that the custodial staff uses to mark when a bathroom was cleaned and by whom. Other visual supports Sheila instituted include proper hand washing and trash disposal.

Due to Sheila’s knowledge and commitment to her job, she has begun training other people with disabilities in custodial job responsibilities. Paul Shaffer, an individual Sheila is currently training, shared, “I like to work with her. She is a good supervisor and a good person. I’m learning how to clean and she taught me how to vacuum and dust every wall.”

Although she takes pride in the work she does, Sheila is looking forward to retirement. She recently started attending VersAbility’s Envisions Day Support program at Hampton two days a week, her other two days are spent leading the custodial team until she chooses to fully retire. In Envisions, she delivers Meals on Wheels, creates art, and stays active, but it’s learning how to use a computer that is the most exciting to her.

On her days off, Sheila stays busy. She often travels, enjoying trips to Hawaii, New York, and Florida. One Friday each month, she gets together with her senior citizens group, the “Lunch Bunch.” Saturdays are for bowling, going to the gym, meeting up with girlfriends, and attending usher meetings at her church. Sheila may be retiring, but there’s certainly no slowing her down!

“I love the work I do and they like having me here.”

- Sheila Jackson

“She is a good supervisor and a good person.”

- Paul Shaffer

VersAbility Colleague
The individuals profiled in the previous pages have grown through the services they receive from VersAbility and the support they receive from the community. Thank you for helping people with disabilities lead exceptional lives of purpose.

Thank you!

To join the many supporters of VersAbility and help individuals with disabilities reach their potential, you can:

- Make a monetary donation
- Become a Business Partner
- Include VersAbility in your estate planning
- Become a member of VersAbility
- Volunteer your time
- Spread the word about our programs and services

For more information, please contact us at (757) 896-6462

Thank you!
People with disabilities are only limited by our lack of imagination as to what they can achieve.