

Published by the Franklin County Board of Developmental Disabilities
"Helping people to live, learn and work in our community"

Teen with autism shares a song from the heart

As she walked into the school auditorium for a Black History Month program, Raya Smith's eyes lit up. "You're going to sing today," her teacher told her.

The notion might have seemed strange to Raya's Columbus Alternative High School classmates. Up to that moment in late February, they had never heard her utter a word.

But for the next four minutes and 44 seconds, everyone in the audience listened with rapt attention as Raya – who has autism and doesn't speak – stood onstage and filled the big room with her big voice. The 18-year-old chose *And I Am Telling You* for her performance and she sang it flawlessly.

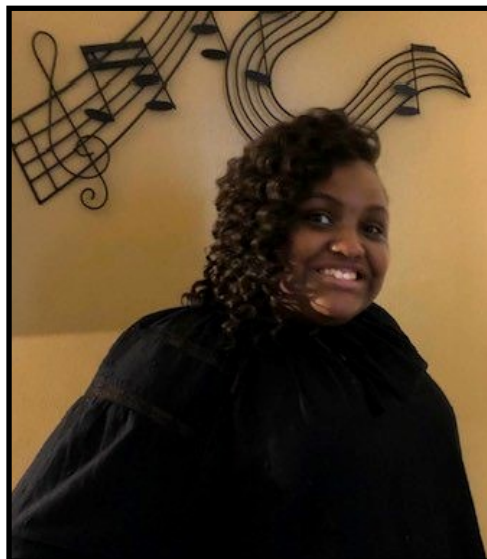
The auditorium erupted not only in applause, but also with standing ovations and tears.

"I couldn't even stay in the room, I was so emotional," said Anika Brown, an instructional assistant who works closely with Raya at Columbus Alternative. "For someone who is non-verbal? I've never seen anything like it."

Seeing the reactions of Raya's typical peers felt wonderful, especially after the pandemic had caused students to miss so much over the past two years, said Raya's mom, Angela Jones. "One of her teachers said, 'If they didn't know her then, they do now,'" said Jones, who also is a service coordinator at the Franklin County Board of Developmental Disabilities.

Raya has language, but doesn't use it to communicate with speech, her mom said. "She's unable or chooses not to. I talk to her constantly; if she answers me one day, I'll have a heart attack."

Though she seems to prefer singing, Raya also reads music and plays various instruments. Her grandfather bought her first keyboard at age 4 and she took to it immediately. "She just started playing," Jones said. "The words that came out, you couldn't understand them, but you could tell what the song was."



Music is Raya's "happy place," her family says.



Angela Jones, right, said her daughter Raya Smith inspired her to go back to school and become an FCBDD service coordinator.

Raya also has perfect pitch, Jones said. "She doesn't like it if you're not on key or you mess up. She looks at me and laughs when I try to sing."

It's possible for people to have dramatically different abilities when it comes to speech and singing, said Dr. Gene Arnold, a psychiatrist and professor emeritus at Ohio State University. "Music is in the right brain and ordinary speech is in the left," he said. "It's believed that autism has a tendency for left-brain impairment and right-brain skills."

There have been cases of people with left-hemisphere brain damage, for example, who lose the ability to speak, but "can answer your question if they sing the answer," Arnold said. And then there those with a so-called savant skill, or extraordinary aptitude in an area such as music or math, that stands out like "an island of genius" amid the challenges of autism, he said.

Raya's mind may work differently, but it also does so beautifully, her family and teachers say. Brown, one of her instructors at Columbus Alternative, has observed Raya as the teen moves into her "mode," immersing herself in music.

"She'll have her headphones on, listening, and she'll start crying," Brown said. "You see the tears and she's just moving. They say music is the universal language, right? For Raya, it really is."

Advocacy spotlight

Tyrone Gladney: Never give up on yourself

For too long, Tyrone Gladney says, he kept to his comfort zone. He avoided big risks, but he wasn't having much fun.

"I was sick, I was depressed, I wasn't happy," Gladney said. "I had high blood pressure, headaches, was eating all the wrong foods."

When he decided to make some changes, his providers – whom Gladney says are more like family – were ready to lend all the support he needed. "He wanted to lose weight, so staff assisted him in that journey," said Cher Jallow of Tender Loving Care, a small disability-services company.

Gladney worked closely with a fitness-minded staff member and changed his diet. He boxes, bicycles, does pushups and plays basketball. "Tyrone has cerebral palsy, decreased motor skills in his hands and feet, and he cannot walk well, but he's a fighter," Jallow said. "He's my inspiration. He has a great personality."

Gladney, 42, also is a long-time employee of Safelite AutoGlass and has an adult son who is in college and doing well. Gladney feels good and says he no longer needs blood-pressure medicine:

Committing to new habits and activities can be tough for many of us. What's your advice to others, especially people with disabilities?

You have to believe you can change, that you can do it. You've got to love yourself enough. Also, never give up on yourself.

Having the right provider probably makes a big difference, too.

Cher fights for you. She'll go to war for you. I do so many things now – I go to restaurants, travel, I went to the ocean for the first time a couple months ago. Cher pulled me right out of my comfort zone. That saved me.



Your job as a customer-service representative requires you to be on the phone quite a bit. How have you handled that challenge?

At first, I got frustrated a lot. Then I learned some techniques – I slowed down, and it got easier. I have a speech impediment, but I take the most calls. Sometimes people are jerks, but that's on them.

You're also a big sports fan and love the Buckeyes.

Definitely. I play basketball; football is probably my favorite to watch. I have the adaptive bike, and I want to do at least 20 miles this week.

It's important to look on the bright side, you say. Even when it comes to parking lots.

When I see an accessible space, I'm like, let's go! And at Disney World? We don't have to wait at the end of the line for rides. Bam!

Nisonger center offers personalized tours of Smart Home

Curious about whether assistive technology can help your or a loved one with disabilities live more independently?

The Smart Home Discovery Place at the Ohio State University Nisonger Center is scheduling free, in-person or virtual tours that allow participants to try out technology solutions before buying. Both individual and group tours of the home-like environment are available.

Tailored tours provide personalized insights into ways technology can support people to do more on their own so that they need less help from others. Group tours are designed to offer an overview of technology options, with demonstrations of various supports for cooking, complex tasks, safety and accountability from support teams.

The Smart Home Discovery Place also has a new online scheduling tool. To learn more, go to nisonger.osu.edu/technology-project/shdp-2



Good For You

Notable achievements in the FCBDD community

Congratulations to Chad Schoen, who recently graduated from the LINC (Learning to Identify & Navigate Change) program in Franklin County Municipal Court. Chad was featured in *Dateline* last year for his work in the microenterprise skills lab at the Goodwill Learning Center. Keep up the good work, Chad!



The Franklin County Special Olympics program made a splash in more ways than one during this year's Polar Plunge. Our Flyers were a top fundraiser, with about \$38,000 donated in support of athletic programs. Kudos to Flyers volunteer Richard Thompson, who ruled the costume contest.



Barry Warren, who does a great job with the ARC Industries cleaning crew, doesn't like to be tied to one hair color. Barry said he got his mom to help him go green for St. Patrick's Day. It's almost as bright as his smile!



Gahanna Mayor Laurie Jadwin presented a mayoral proclamation dedicating March as Developmental Disabilities Awareness Month to Amanda Smith, pictured on the left, of ARC Industries, Inc. and to Ethan Boerner, center, a member of the FCBDD Self-Advocate Advisory Council. Way to represent, Ethan!



Career Milestones

35 Years
Dianna Taylor

30 Years
Sally Starrett

15 Years
Claudette Moncrief

5 Years
Angela Franke
Gretchen Haag

Thanks to Kim Hauck, director of the Ohio Department of Developmental Disabilities, and to Chase Waits, director of public relations and community education at the Delaware County Board of Developmental Disabilities, for joining our recent Self-Advocate Advisory Council meeting.



Ken Gagen retires after more than 40 years at FCBDD

Looking back, Ken Gagen figures he began his job with the Franklin County Board of Developmental Disabilities at just the right time. It was 1980, and many people with developmental disabilities were leaving institutions to build lives in their communities.

"You saw major and quick development of skills, due to opportunity and exposure to new programs," Gagen said. "It was a really neat time."

His position at ARC Industries, then a part of the county board, felt like a blend of what he liked best about his earlier social work with youth and the elderly. "I just always had an interest in working with people," he said.

Gagen, 72, retired last month after 42 years with the agency. He was first in the workshops and spent the second half of his career as a service coordinator. Gagen wrapped up on St. Patrick's Day, the same day he joined FCBDD.

"He has such historical perspective to share," said Allison Zuhosky, service coordination supervisor. "Ken is a great guy and he deserves so much recognition for his dedication. The individuals were always more important to him than the paperwork."

Gagen plans to travel, garden and volunteer. We wish him all the best.



Advocates make their voices heard at the Statehouse

More than 700 people took part in the 2022 Developmental Disabilities Awareness and Advocacy Day last month, watching online or attending in-person events at the Statehouse.

"It was great to be there," said Marci Straughter, a self-advocate who recently was appointed to the Franklin County Board of Developmental Disabilities. "I got to see friends I haven't seen in two years because of the pandemic."

Straughter, the first person to serve on the FCBDD board while receiving services from the agency, said that while she had fun, the most important thing she did was to talk to legislators and their aides about the direct-support professional workforce crisis.

As a consumer, Straughter has been personally affected by worker shortages at times, requiring her to rely more on remote support and assistive technologies. Those options are important but cannot fully take the place of on-site support, she said.

"We need to make sure there are enough DSPs so that people feel complete, so that they're not scared," she said. "I want legislators to know about these needs. People are out here in the world and they need help."

State officials said Ohio began distributing \$210 million in federal money as "provider relief payments" to developmental disabilities service providers in March.

"DSPs are the cornerstone of our service-delivery system," said Kim Hauck, director of the Ohio Department of Developmental Disabilities.

Hauck said she wants Ohioans with developmental disabilities and their families to know that "the department is here to listen to you, and to include you."



Local musician Zayne Harshaw provided the entertainment at the Statehouse.

Dateline

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www.fcbdd.org

Calendar

Editor's Note: The following calendar is tentative due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Call 614-342-5950 before attending any meeting to see if it is still scheduled.

April 2022

- 15 Staff Development Day for West Central School and Early Childhood Education
- 18-22 Spring Break for West Central School and ECE.
- 25 Classes resume for West Central School and ECE.
- 28 Franklin County Board of Developmental Disabilities Board Finance and Human Resources & Ethics Committees meeting, 2879 Johnstown Rd., 4 p.m.
- 28 Franklin County Board of Developmental Disabilities Board meeting, 2879 Johnstown Rd., Columbus. 5 p.m.

