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College Student with Learning Disabilities Designs His Own Future

A drafting class offered at a local technical school in Tennessee was just what Charles Rachal needed when he was a junior in high school. It turned out to be the first step in a challenging and rewarding journey that he couldn't even have imagined at the time. Today, just five years later, Charles is completing his fourth year of architecture studies at Wentworth Institute of Technology in Boston. This coming August, he and 30 fellow Wentworth students will travel to Berlin for fall semester to study architectural design and history.



Charles Rachal

Identified with learning disabilities in sixth grade, Charles has always struggled in school. Both reading and math are difficult for him. Even now, with college graduation in sight, he seems a little surprised at what he has accomplished. "Every semester [during the first two years at Wentworth] there were courses where I thought, 'This will be the end of me!' It was one of the roughest times of my life," he adds. "Looking back on it now, I don't know how I did it. But also, the challenges made it a positive experience."

At the age of 22, he has already done several years of serious thinking about how to persist in his goals, in spite of the inevitable discouragement and obstacles. During middle school and high school, it seemed that, no matter how hard he worked, he rarely made good grades — and regularly made bad ones. Fortunately, his parents didn't pressure him about his grades, except when they thought he hadn't given a class his best effort. "Around sixth or seventh grade," Charles recalls, "I was definitely pushed to do my best. Even when I was bringing home awful grades, I didn't get punished for it, but they would tell me to try harder. My mom would tell me, 'You're not dumb; you just have a [learning]

problem. A lot of people have it. Do your best."

Even with his parents' understanding and support, however, he remembers becoming very discouraged about school. By eighth grade he was in a pretty constant state of what he describes as "sluggish." Charles's mom decided, as she explained it to him at the time, that it might be good for him to have "someone to talk to." That's how he met the therapist who helped him discover what has remained one of his most valuable coping strategies— running.

"He told me that it would be good," Charles remembers, "instead of sitting around sulking—not his exact words, obviously—to get out and run and get my mind off things — that it would make me feel better and think better. And that was the case. I'd always heard that, but until I actually applied it to myself, I didn't really understand where they were coming from."

Although he can't remember a particular moment in high school when he started to think about goals for his future, he does remember a slow shift away from focusing so much on his struggles. During after-school hours, when he wasn't practicing with the school band, Charles says, he had a lot of time by himself to think. "I can't really pinpoint a specific moment when the 'light came on' in my head," he says. "But I can remember slowly having a more positive outlook, wanting to get more involved, and to think about the future a little more. Instead of thinking, 'Well, I'm not getting any better,' I kept focused on what was going to happen in the future. It was just having a different outlook."

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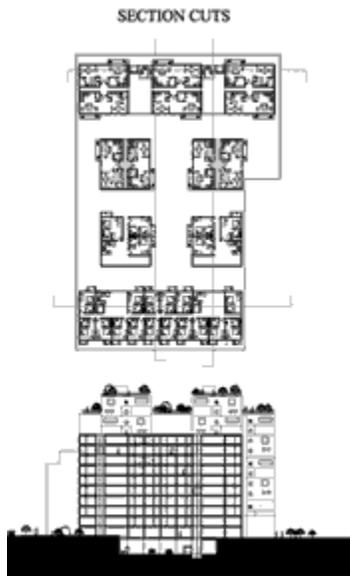
The opportunity during his junior year of high school to take a half-day of drafting and Computer Assisted Design (CAD) classes at nearby Tennessee Technical Center at Crossville (TTC) helped shift his thinking about career possibilities. "It was an encouragement," Charles remembers, "when I saw older students getting into these computer models, and to think about maybe going to school to learn how to do the computer work, with a focus on design. It also was an encouragement toward architecture because I knew I would need to have some of these same skills in architecture."

By the end of his senior year of high school he had accumulated 750 hours of drafting experience. As it turned out, this gave Charles a jump start when he applied to the architecture program at Wentworth Institute of Technology. In order to

qualify for the five-year Bachelor of Architecture degree, he was required to complete a two-year core subjects program, and then apply by portfolio for his BA. Although fewer than one-quarter of the entering students were accepted into the BA program, Charles was one of them.

"Experiencing something completely different" was an overarching goal for Charles when he began to think seriously about his future. "I figured a complete change would be an encouragement to make myself stronger and to open up my eyes to what's going on in the world," he recalls. Because he'd spent his entire life in small towns in the South, he was drawn to Wentworth partly because it was located in Boston.

The social and cultural differences in the urban North turned out to be both stimulating and challenging. "People in Boston are a lot different from what I was used to," Charles says with a chuckle. "It takes awhile for people to warm up to you here. I didn't get it at first and for awhile I almost felt like 'Why is everybody upset with me?' On the other hand, in Boston you can choose who you want to be around from a lot more diverse range of people. That's a big plus."



*Architectural drawings
by Charles Rachal*

In a recent design project for school, Charles made the switch from simply completing an assignment for a class, to taking "full ownership" for the design challenges the project presented. The project was a mixed-use building, for which students were asked to design residential, commercial, and hotel space. Charles took a unique approach to the design problem by making the hotel and residential spaces interchangeable, so that the building owners could take advantage of changing economic conditions in the neighborhood. Because he spent so much time problem-solving the design issues, he didn't end up with as polished a final product as he ideally would have. But it was worth it.

"Rather than feeling upset about the [average] grade I received," Charles comments, "I felt proud because I had a good understanding of the subject and I worked hard. I just did 'too much,' something I wasn't previously used to doing. So even though my grade doesn't reflect the entire semester the project took, I'm proud of the work that went into it and the results that came out of it."

Not surprisingly, Charles has begun to think about his goals for after college graduation. He'd like to work for a couple of years, and then go to graduate school. "Why stop at Wentworth when I can keep going?" he says. "It took me 15 years just to figure out how to do well in school. I really hope to be able to get as much learning as possible. Lot's of people take school success for granted because it's so easy for them. They don't have to struggle or figure out how their mind works. I'm still figuring that out today — how to focus my mind and do things more efficiently.

"Every kid I've met with learning or other disabilities kind of sees things differently," he adds. "They're dealing with multiple disadvantages that most students don't have to deal with. But they're more aware than other kids. When you have a disability, you have to use your strengths to defeat your disability."

Asked what advice he would give to parents of kids with learning and attention problems, Charles offers the following:

- **"Expect your child to be successful;** don't feel sorry for him. Don't let identification of a learning problem become an excuse. It is better for a kid to know that he's bright and has a specific learning disability, than to feel like he's lazy or stupid.
- **Reading and academic subjects are important.** Expect your child to take a challenging curriculum, even if he has to take a class twice. The perseverance will help in all areas.
- **Have lots of reading material of all kinds around.** It's hard to be self-conscious about reading when the Weekly World News has such good news about Big Foot and Martians.
- **Books on tape are wonderful.** I discovered [author] Douglas Adams's (*Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*) on tape and later read his print books. I also discovered great motivational speakers like Zig Ziglar on audiotape.
- **Music is wonderful; high school marching band was a great leveler.** Cooperation, concentration, self-discipline and social skills are all developed and rewarded.
- **Physical activity is crucial.** I started running in high school and found that depression and discouragement are

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no match for the strength you gain through movement. The more I run, the better my work is.

- **Expose your child to a wide range of people.** Even bright, educated adults can be narrow-minded about career expectations for their children. Fortunately, I saw in my large extended family that there were many paths to success — for example an uncle with learning disabilities who went to law school.
- **Most important of all, STOP WORRYING!** When my parents worried about me, it hurt my confidence. Help and support your child, but know that lots of wildly successful people have overcome much worse than learning disabilities."

About the Contributor(s)



Linda Broatch, Writer/Editor, has an M.A. in Education, with a focus in Child Development, personal experience in supporting those who have learning difficulties, and has worked for many years in nonprofit organizations that serve the health and education needs of children.

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