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# Preparing for the Future

## Part 2

### Taking the Next Steps

By Cherie Takemoto

Joe Gaito and his mother Nancy were part of a team who attended PEATC's *NEXT STEPS* Workshops 7 & 8. Joe will finish his academic studies and continue at the Arlington Career Center to prepare for life and work after high school.

This is how Joe described himself recently. "I am a person with disabilities. I try to be like everyone else and try to do my best. When I graduate, I would like to be known and remembered as an honest kid with a good attitude." While Joe tries to be like everyone else, he is also aware that there are some things that he can't do as well as everyone else. "It is a long road. I realize I am different and am not ashamed to tell people. When something is hard, I need to be calm and not make a scene."

After high school, Joe's ideal job is as a cook or a chef. While in school, he had a work study job at a kitchen in a retirement home and was happy with the job he did because he thought he was up to the task. "I saw the bright side of me instead of the sloppy side." He also has tried work sites that were not as successful. He thinks it is good to try different things because you always run into jobs you don't like.



A very personable young man, Joe has some definite work strengths. He has a positive attitude and knows the importance of helping people get to know him. He is also aware of the balance between talking all the time and getting down to work. He can point to his perfect attendance at school to show potential employers that he is serious and responsible.

Joe also recognizes that he would not be where he is today without the teamwork and help from his parents and others. When he attended the *NEXT STEPS* workshops, his team included his mother, his vocational education teacher and a person from the Community Services Board. This was the first time that he had sat down at a table with others to make plans for his future. Joe thought it was a good learning experience for him and everyone on his team.

Joe's advice for parents:

1. **Try to find out about programs for your kid.** If my mom hadn't searched them out, who knows where I would have ended up.
2. **Be open with your kids.** If you have personal needs or issues, just be honest and talk about them and be loving about it.
3. **Let your kid know his strengths.** You want your child to feel good about himself and that he can do things. Help your kid understand what it takes to be successful. Help him to realize strengths so he will be able to use them to help other people.

4. **Do things with your kids.** Even if they don't always act like it, know they want to do things with you.
5. **Keep the faith.** I wish you the best of luck. We have been lucky and blessed about having almost everything go right.

Nancy's advice for other parents of high schoolers:

1. **Picture your child at 30.** Is he as healthy, happy and self-supporting as he can be? Keep this in mind, even when your child is in kindergarten. Then set your sights on where you will be going next.
2. **Get help from the school system while you can.** The school system has people who are paid and required to be there to help you. After our children leave the system, these people aren't there anymore.
3. **Get help from other parents.** I have found out about many of the services and supports Joe received through other parents. I'm afraid to see what happens to the kids who do not have parents as involved as we have been able to be.
4. **Plan for the day when you won't be around.** As you get older, you realize that it's not necessarily going to be all right. You have to make decisions about guard-

- ianship and other legal issues. Think about at what point you talk to your children or others about their job helping take care of their sibling with disabilities.
5. **Use a team approach to planning for the future.** The NEXT STEPS workshops spurred us on to make plans for transition. They also helped us learn about the systems and the people who will be involved with Joe in his adult life. The chance to meet face-to-face around the table was a blessing.
  6. **Develop a sense of humor.** It will take you far, and people really respond to it.

What's ahead for Joe? He's excited about meeting new people and doing new things. As he says, "I'm looking forward to having a bigger and better challenge every day." Joe is indeed a man with a future.



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