



Jennica's Speech for Family Weekend Brunch

ASAT student Jennica Harris was a featured speaker at Chapel Haven's April 27, 2014 Family Weekend Brunch. Her remarks are shared with her permission.

Hello! It's been a long journey to get where I am now – successfully beginning a career in accounting, feeling at home in New Haven, having good friends, and feeling a lot more confident in myself. I grew up in Santa Barbara, California. Many people have asked me why I would come to New Haven and leave beautiful and sunny Santa Barbara. The ASAT program definitely made the move worth it! I owe a lot of my success to the ASAT program and to my parents, but mostly to my hard work, determination, persistence, and strong desire to improve and succeed.

I have always been good at school. I enjoyed it, and did very well. I think that is why I never got a diagnosis of Asperger's Syndrome until

after I graduated from college. Right after high school, I attended Sweet Briar College, a small, all-women's college in Virginia, and majored in psychology. I did not always know how to join informal social gatherings and I wasn't always certain whether a particular peer liked me or not, but on the whole, students were nice to me there.



When I graduated from Sweet Briar, I had a dream of becoming a nurse practitioner. I imagined monitoring patients' progress and giving them health advice, so I enrolled at Santa Barbara City College in a Certified Nursing Assistant course. The instructor said that although I was very strong academically, she noticed I had difficulty interacting with

patients. She recommended that I get evaluated for Asperger's Syndrome, and advised that nursing may not be the right career path for me. I was sad for about 6 months about my dream being crushed. I knew that if I wanted to be a nurse I could find a way and not let one person's opinion stop me. But I also knew that I would need to be able to interact with people in any profession. This experience influenced my parents and me to work with a psychologist and speech therapist on these challenges. After talking it over with my parents and meeting with career counselors at Santa Barbara City College, I chose Accounting for my career. My parents saw a lot of strengths in me that would be assets in accounting.

I attended a California State University for my second bachelor's degree in Business Administration with an Accounting Option. I was very active on campus. I also received services to work on communication skills in the university's speech-language clinic and from a private Speech Language Pathologist. During two recruiting seasons I interviewed with CPA firms, but didn't get hired. I worried that no one would ever want to hire me because of my difficulties with social skills. I knew my dad, a partner in a CPA firm, would hire me, and I enjoyed working for his firm for a 6-month internship, but I wanted more options and to be more independent.

Even though I received support, in my last semester I became overwhelmed. I got behind in my schoolwork and I felt stuck --- like I couldn't get anything done. My parents were very concerned about me, and I was too, so I asked my mom for help. She drove up to the university to help me stay on track with schoolwork. I managed to complete my last semester successfully.

My parents wondered if something more was causing the sudden increase in my difficulties – this motivated them to contact UCLA's autism center to find out what more could be done to help me. The center recommended Chapel Haven's ASAT program, and my mom and I came to New Haven for a visit. The main thing that drew me to the ASAT program was sitting in on a Social Communication class taught by Sarah Davison. I learned more in that one class session than I learned in weeks of my previous speech therapy; I decided to come to the ASAT program after that visit.

Highlights from my first year include the social recreation program – where I experienced various activities with other students in the community. I also worked hard to pass the bus assessments. When I was a student in California, I traveled independently by subway and car. I was motivated to achieve the same level of independence. During my first year here, I traveled to all my interviews by bus, and even took the bus to my first job checking tax returns for errors.

In my second-year, I have been more independent and more successful in my career path. Staff still help me with some tasks and provide advice and support, but they also encourage me to be independent and to make decisions on my own. In my time in the program, I have built strong friendships with some of the graduates, and I am acting as a friend and mentor to the first-years. I have been in SCSU's choir for two semesters building music skills and friendships – choir members go out to Delaney's (the local pub) after each choir rehearsal.

I've had my car in New Haven since September, and I really appreciate the convenience. Having a car in the snow for the first time has posed additional challenges – learning how to use an ice scraper, shoveling my car out of a drift, moving my car off the street when it snows, and learning how to drive in snow and ice. But the benefits of having a car definitely outweigh the challenges.

I am thankful that ASAT has helped me prepare for my career, and I've had success in jobs. I spent 6 months working at a construction company doing various office tasks, and I was hired to prepare tax returns at a CPA firm for this past tax-season. My boss and co-workers really liked me, and they all commented on how well I did. I know I will have a happy and successful career, because I have become skilled in tax preparation, and I have improved my interview skills and success

with interacting with co-workers and clients. When I graduated from California State University, I had no confidence that I would ever find a job, and now I know that I will find a job and be successful.

Graduation is less than two months away -- which happens to be the same day as my 28th birthday! I am excited about the apartment search I have begun with a graduate, Katy Balog; we got along really well when we were roommates last year. I am looking for a full-time accounting job and I plan to continue to be involved in the ASAT community. I look forward to meeting the next group of first years. I also plan to continue with the SCSU choir. If you're around tomorrow, we're performing at Spring Glen Church in Hamden at 7:30 PM.

Thank you very much for listening to my story, and enjoy the rest of Family Weekend.