

Family Moves to West Valley for Special Programming

By Jennifer Schwegman, Glendale Star Contributing Writer

When Kendra was born, her mother Vicki Jensen threw hopeful wishes and private requests out into the universe. She prayed that her daughter would be healthy, strong and independent.

Kendra was born with Down syndrome, but Jensen was determined that it would not stand in the way of her daughter having a beautiful, meaningful and fulfilling life.

“Kendra was born in Portland, Oregon,” Jensen said. “While our situation was a bit unique, it was also pretty typical. We celebrated Kendra’s first smile, tooth and watched her grow. However, when Kendra was 18 months old, I made the decision that I needed more family support, so we packed up our stuff and moved to Bend, Oregon.”

Celebrations continued, and having family around offered the support that was needed.

As the years went by, Kendra attended public school and graduated from high school.

Although she attended the Life Skills and after-school Transition Co-Op programs for two years, she was often left to her own devices and spent nearly a year without any type of supportive programming.

With zero options available, Kendra was bored. She wanted to move out on her own and attend college. Honoring Kendra’s wishes, Jensen helped her daughter move into a group home. She was excited about being independent and attending special programming during the day.

“Unfortunately, Kendra’s hopes didn’t match up with reality,” Jensen said. “She spent her time cutting and pasting pictures out of magazines. If she wasn’t doing that, she was watching a movie. It got to the point where she just didn’t want to go anymore. In addition, her living situation was less than ideal. There were so many things wrong with it, and we had to bring her home.”

It was a tough situation. Like many parents of children who have intellectual disabilities, they discovered few options for Kendra to be social, make friends, learn, grown and thrive. Jensen wanted her daughter to be strong and independent, but the outlook was dismal.

Then fate stepped in. After sharing her frustrations with others and doing a bit of research, Jensen learned that Arizona had a number of organizations that offered the promise of special programming to promote independence. They made plans to visit Phoenix and scheduled interviews and tours.

“We left Kendra at home,” Jensen said. “We didn’t want to get her hopes up.”

After touring a couple options, Jensen visited One Step Beyond, a school that provides programs that empower adults who have intellectual disabilities to become independent, employed, and socially involved in their communities.

Life skills programs help participants strengthen independent living skills, emphasizing money management, functional literacy, social skills and safe community access. Employment programs provide training and volunteer opportunities that lead to employment. Recreation and fine arts programs offer music, art, dance and fitness, emphasizing personal wellness. They are also the only community-based day training program in Arizona with

a special needs hockey team, the One Step Coyotes.

“We spoke with Kendra on the telephone and told her we found ‘a college’ for her but if she wanted to attend, she would need to move,” Jensen said.

“When we got home, we discovered that Kendra decided to have a garage sale. She had moved her stuff to the garage and put sticky notes on the stuff she wanted to sell. When we walked in the door, she said, ‘Pack your stuff. We’re moving.’”

The family moved to Phoenix, and Kendra began programming at One Step Beyond.

Today, Kendra, 29, is thriving. She has been attending OSBI for four years and has even attended a couple community college classes through the prevocational program.

“Kendra loves it and wants to do more,” Jensen added. “She enjoys the culinary program, dancing, karaoke and band. The social part is huge. During Friday Night Fun Night, she gets to go out with friends. This is the biggest part of why we wanted this program.”

One Step Beyond has four Valley campuses located in Glendale, Surprise, Peoria and Scottsdale as well as a location in San Carlos, California. More information about OSBI’s innovative programming and services, meaningful employment and volunteer opportunities is available at osbi.org.

