

Special needs student passes Gateway with holistic help

By Michelle La Vone

Ryan McFolin will soon get up to answer his friend's phone call, but for now he sits on an arm chair with a cloth bag full of *Japa mala*, or Hindu prayer beads, in his right hand. His dad, sitting on the adjacent living room couch surrounded by numerous of his own paintings, recalls the stressful past few months.

In April and May, Ryan appeared in the *Tennessean* with a case heartbreaking to many—he had failed his first two attempts at passing the Algebra Gateway and if he didn't make the cut the final time, he couldn't graduate with a high school diploma. His dreams of getting a PhD in history would be crushed.

He is now a 19-yr-old freshman at Volunteer State Community College, one of the 19 colleges that was interested in accommodating a student with his special needs. Ryan has Asperger's syndrome, typically characterized by the ability to lose focus easily and have extreme difficulty learning one subject area while excelling in another.

But the syndrome has hardly limited his extracurricular activities. Ryan was a member of the National High School Honor Society in ninth grade and traveled to Australia with the Ambassador program in high school. He is also an Eagle Scout and devout Hindu. He refers to the latter as his greatest achievement.

“At 19 he's accomplished more than I have in 15 - 20 years of writing to politicians,” says Don McFolin, his son's nonstop advocate for promoting fairness in the school system.

McFolin sued the Board of Education in April for not giving special needs students a different set of graduation criteria more compliant to their learning disabilities. He has since dropped the case but is still pursuing other means of change.

“As much as I want to get back to my painting, this has got to be corrected. It's not right. I'm the one who says it very plainly,” says McFolin.

This year, testing has become even stricter. Students must now pass several end-of-course assessments including three math exams.

“It's stupid,” says Ryan, unsatisfied with the reasoning behind forcing students like him into mastering subject areas completely unrelated to their chosen fields of study. He is certain he will not need algebra to become a history professor and is sure others feel the same way.

“Why should they be denied their diploma if they did all the other work? There's no reason, he's not going to be a mathematician,” says his father.

Ryan was told of his second failure on the Gateway just minutes before having to take his end-of-semester Algebra exam in December. He did pass his course—but in a few more months, he'd be given one last chance to prove himself as capable as any other student on the state standardized Gateway exam.

“I don't see how he kept from having a mental nervous breakdown,” says his father. “I don't know how he kept himself sane.”

Ryan received tutoring three hours a week leading up to the test and studied on his own.

The story in spring's paper brought an unanticipated phone call Don's way. Medical Qigong Master J. Michael Wood, Director of the International Institute of Medical Qigong in Nashville, contacted Don and offered to help him and his son deal with their anxieties using ancient Chinese techniques. Don, physically and mentally worn out, agreed. Within three meditation sessions of three hours each, Wood had shown father and son how to breathe correctly and calm down their nervous systems. He also taught them how to use the *Shaolin* emotional healing technique, called "Open the Door, Remove the Thief" to release their toxic emotional energy, in this case fear, anxiety and doubt.

Chinese Medical Qigong dates back thousands of years and still today is a common practice among Eastern cultures. The overall purpose of Medical Qigong is to rebalance the patient's energetic body through breath work and internal manipulation of the qi, or energy.

Skeptical? One way to realize this energetic force is to dangle a tea bag over the palms of your hands, being careful not to move the bag with the fingers that hold the string. Concentrate fully and focus on the bag, waiting for a response. Within minutes, the bag should begin moving. Skilled Qigong practitioners have a strong energetic field that greatly increases the circumference of the circle as compared to those less experienced.

"It [Qigong] helped me a bit more than the tutors," says Ryan. "Some people would say it's black magic but no, it's not," he says, explaining how black magic is used to harm people and medical energetic work taps into the "supreme personality of God".

On test day Ryan brought his copy of the *Bhagavad-Gita*, a Hindu scripture, into the room. He believes it was his prayers to Krishna, the "Supreme Person" and speaker of the *Bhagavad-Gita*, in combination with the tutors and Qigong that pulled him through.

That day he remembered to breathe. Proper breathing, according to Wood, relies on the ability to breathe fully through the abdomen and out through the nose. Breathing this way allows more oxygen to the brain.

"Proper breathing mechanics encourage the body to perform optimally, while improper breathing mechanics encourage fight or flight," said Wood. Fight or flight is a response regulated by the sympathetic nervous system that puts the body in an alarmed state—sweating palms, increased heart rate and lack of oxygen to the brain occur, which impairs the ability to focus and recall information.

"I was nervous," Ryan said, but the Qigong methods helped. "It helped me get the worrying out."

His father is mystified by these energetic forces he renders as unexplainable. "It's all just interrelated," he says. "Your energy, your consciousness, I don't know how exactly to describe it."

But Ryan gets it.

"I know what he [Wood] is doing. He's doing something that's been around for thousands of years, and that's been God-centered. Qigong is what I would call Chinese Yoga."

His father adamantly believes the Eastern energetic work helped his son the most. He said with glistening eyes, "That is what saved him."

After one and a half hours in the room, Ryan left feeling good about the test. It was a six o'clock phone call in the morning on May 15 that brought the good news.

Among all the pictures of Ryan on McFolin's studio wall, a third-grade multiplication test with an A+ hangs in the middle.

"I put that up so when he was younger and would say 'I can't do it', I'd point to it [and say]. . . You can do it," McFolin says.

And he did. □