



Offers Teens' Parents a Place to Start

*Aut viam inveniam
aut faciam.*

That's a Latin phrase attributed to Hannibal, a Carthaginian general, during the Second Punic War, when he was told by his generals that it would be impossible to cross the Alps by elephant.

It means, "I will find a path, or make one."

Well, that was great for Hannibal, who had elephants. And generals. And an army.

But if you are a parent trying to help a child transition from school days to early adulthood, to find a way up that mountain, it's not so easy. In fact, sometimes you can feel all alone.

"Too many times, parents have told me, 'I didn't even know what questions to ask,'" when they were helping their children explore life options, said Karen Leugers, Transition Specialist with Mercer DD.

Mercer DD never wants parents to feel alone. And so, it has launched a website, Mercer County Quest (mercercountyquest.com) that offers parents and caregivers an easy way to access information about programs and agencies that can help students take important steps into their future.

Karen, along with Beth Gehret, Support and Service Administration Director, introduced Quest

at April's SALT meeting at St. John Lutheran Church in Celina.

Meant for parents of students age 14–22, Quest gives families a place to start. "This website has a lot of information," Karen said.

"Each child is unique, so Quest can't necessarily hand you all the answers, but it can help get you to the person who has the answers.

"We named it Quest because a quest is a journey—and we always talk about our kids being on a journey from high school to adulthood."

Quest offers a transition timeline, which gives parents a rough idea of when they need to take certain steps in the process. (It's a good idea to start when your child is 14, with a goal of making continual progress throughout the rest of his or her school years.) It lists resources for vocational education and job training programs, as well as post-secondary education.

There are sections on finances, community support and recreation, medical and mental health,



Karen Leugers presents the Quest website to parents at a SALT meeting in April.

"We named it Quest because a quest is a journey—and we always talk about our kids being on a journey from high school to adulthood."

and other aspects of a fulfilling, balanced adult life.

"We wanted Quest to be a one-stop shop. If you have questions about support and services in our county, this is where you can go," she said.

Parent Jacque Leverette served on the committee that helped pull Quest together. "This whole path (of transition) with my daughter, it's a journey. Just like
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Taking Stock, Giving Thanks on a Big Bday

I've had the great fortune of turning 50 years old recently. I call it a great fortune—some people would probably call it a curse. Oddly, I have never dreaded milestone birthdays. Instead, I view them as accomplishments that should be celebrated.

The Mercer Board of DD staff decided to celebrate the 50 days prior to my birthday. They took turns delivering me a small “gift” (a term that I am using loosely) every day. I am still trying to find a purpose for the 50 marbles and 50 bottle caps. In all honesty, I appreciate that they were thinking of me, and I appreciate their



Mercer DD Superintendent Shawn Thieman

efforts—thank you.

A lot can, and does, happen in ten years. In my twenties, I graduated from college, started a career, got married and had a child. In my thirties, I had two more children, obtained a master's degree and began employment at the Mercer County Board of Developmental Disabilities. In my forties, I was named the superintendent at the Board of DD and began dedicating myself to the role of making Mercer County a great place for all of its citizens to live. I am very proud of the progress we have made and look forward to further successes.

The development of additional services to students who are transitioning from school to adulthood is an area that we have widely expanded in the past ten years. I am very impressed with the work of Karen Leugers and

her Quest Team. As you will read in this newsletter, the team did a fantastic job of creating a website, mercercountyquest.com, that is overflowing with information and resources. This website will be very useful to the families and professionals who are shaping the lives of our young people.

Our Special Olympics efforts have also been reconstructed and energized in the past ten years. Sam Fledderjohann's efforts resulted in 28 individuals who will be participating in the Summer Games in Columbus. Also, two young ladies have been selected to participate in the National Summer Games in Orlando, in June.

I can't wait to hear the stories and accomplishments that will be experienced during these events. I am sure that we will share them with you in the next issue.

Remembering Mike Wolfe

Power Lifting Coach had a Great Way of Encouraging Athletes.

When the right person appears on the horizon at just the right time, it can make all the difference.

That's what happened when Mercer DD was forming its power lifting club at Celine's CrossFit gym. There, Sam Fledderjohann, Mercer DD's Special Olympics Coordinator, was put in touch with a man named Mike Wolfe.

“From our first conversation, Mike conveyed that his involvement with our athletes was almost like a gift to him, which was not what I expected,” she said. It was the other way around. Mike, a mountain of a man, had a national reputation among power lifters, was a champion in his own right and an excellent coach.

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“Mike knew how to communicate with our athletes. He respected them, and he demanded their respect.”



Coach Mike Wolfe, left, with power lifter Mitchell Rolsten.

Quest Offers Parents a Place to Start

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with any other parent,” she said in a video interview on the Quest website. “It doesn’t start and stop. As we navigate through transition, it goes from the parent’s journey to the child’s journey. That’s part of transitioning. That’s part of adulthood. And it’s exciting—because you want to see them step into their own journey.”

Quest is available to *any* parent, not just those whose children are served by Mercer DD. “Sometimes a student will have delays, but they are not significant enough to make the student eligible for our services,” said Mercer DD Superintendent Shawn Thieman. “Sometimes those parents can really feel out to sea. They feel like they’ve been left to figure things out completely on their own. But Quest offers ideas for them, too—we hope they will find the help they need at Mercer County Quest. It is at least a place for them to start.”

A comprehensive website gives parents information when they need it—often after normal office hours, said Beth. “Research shows that parents often access this information after 10 p.m. at night, or before 6 a.m.,” she said, searching for answers after their working day ends at night, or before it begins in the morning.

Transitioning is a process that is also supported in school, and Mercer DD will work closely with local schools through the process of introducing and refining Quest. Mercer DD will present Quest to county principals and special education supervisors this month.

Quest is funded by a grant from the American Academy of Pediatrics through its CATCH (Community Access to Child Health) program. “Only a handful of these grants were awarded na-

tionwide, and we got one—so we’re pretty proud of that,” Karen said.

Dr. Melanie Jungblut is a local pediatrician who alerted Mercer DD to the possibility of a grant. She said the years when a child transitions from school to young adulthood are often worrisome for parents.

“We can offer a lot to children with special needs through this collaboration,” she said. “The beauty of this, is that even though we’re in a rural area, we have more resources for students with special needs than any place else I’ve ever experienced. It’s just about getting the word out.”

Dr. Mel worked on the team

that put Quest together. She urges parents to give it a try, and report back to Mercer DD if there is information missing from the website, broken links, or any other issues. “It would be an enormous favor to us if you could pick a segment of the website, click away at it and tell us if it’s useful. If it’s not useful, we can redo it.”

Beth agreed. “There is no ego attached to this project—we just want it to be a great resource for families,” she said.

Quest has no ego attached, but lots of help and hope. And with that, you can climb any mountain. “For us,” said Karen, “Quest is a labor of love.”

Remembering Mike

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He also had an amazing way with the Iron Will power-lifting athletes. “Mike’s involvement propelled us to what we were capable of. Mike knew how to communicate with our athletes,” Sam said.

“He respected them, and he demanded their respect. Often, he didn’t have to say a word. Our athletes wanted to please him, just because of who he was. He was the epitome of what you want a coach to be.”

Mike as a man was strong and true—but he was not invincible. He fell sick last fall and had a long hospital stay, then rehab. The athletes honored their coach by working hard without him. They made cards for him and rooted for him as he had rooted for them.

Mike died on April 15 at the age of 47. “He was such a beloved man,” Sam said. She and Iron Will Coach Jason Wells, a close friend of Mike’s, reached out individually

to the athletes who were particularly close to Coach Mike.

“Some of them came to his funeral,” Sam said. “Many had the reaction, ‘How could this be? Coach Mike was the strongest man I know.’ Like many young people, our athletes believe they are slightly invincible. This was a life lesson for them, and our feelings are still pretty raw.”

Coach Mike’s funeral was “definitely a celebration of his life,” Sam said. He is still a part of the Iron Will team. “Mike wasn’t just a coach. He never grew weary. If there was an issue with any of the athletes, Mike would communicate with the family himself. He did fundraising for us, and so many other things. He genuinely loved these athletes and didn’t need any kind of recognition. He was so proud of them.

“Coach Mike was one in a million.”

Get Up And **MOVE**



Spring is a great time

to try a new sport or get better at an activity you love. Above, Justin Bockrath plays pickleball during an open gym at Mercer DD.



The Mercer County ladies who will travel to Orlando in June to compete in the USA Games, from left, Coach Rachel Craft, Ramsey Leverette, Kaelin Overman and Sam Fledderjohann, Special Olympics Coordinator.

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