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CPD LEGACY STORY: CLARRISA BARNHILL

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This CPD Legacy Story is about Clarissa Barnhill. Clarissa worked as a USU intern student at the Utah Assistive Technology Lab alongside Stan Clelland, learning how to repair and maintain AT equipment. She is currently the Coordinator of the AT Lab at USU.

By Clarissa Barnhill

Do you have a problem? Don't worry, we all have them. And, at the Assistive Technology (AT) Lab at USU, we love problems of all shapes and sizes. We love them because we love to help you solve them.

Some examples: A personal problem I have had is, that due to my height, I have a difficult time finding pants that fit well. For several years now I have had to alter pants in order to accommodate my long legs. At home, I created a seat for a tire swing so my nieces and nephews could use it without falling through the hole. Creating personal AT sparked my interest and the Utah Assistive Technology Program (UATP) was a perfect channel for me to continue creating AT.

My first experience with the UTAP was to work in the AT Lab as a student in the Special Education AT class. My classmates and I made simple, low-tech AT devices. I would excitedly take a bookstand or a cool switch home to show my roommates and friends.

Along with the regular projects, I was part of a team that designed and built the IWAS (Irrigation Wheel Assembly Snapper). We created the IWAS to help a man who assembled irrigation wheels. He has the use of only one arm, so, in order to assemble the wheels, he had to rely on the help of another person. With the IWAS, he was able to do it completely on his own. Presenting the completed device to the man was an event that solidified my passion for AT. We brought the IWAS to his workplace; showed him how it worked, and then let him put a wheel together on his own. The excitement on his face allowed me to see how significantly independence enhances a person's life.

Clarissa and other students working on the IWAS at the AT Lab.

After the AT class was over, I continued to volunteer in the Lab. At first, I came to make modifications to the IWAS, and then stayed on to help with other projects. The next school year, I worked in the AT Lab again. Stan Clelland ran the Lab and took the time to teach me about safety, wheelchair maintenance, the use of different tools, and the best way to help people. Working in the AT lab was one of my favorite things to do with my time, as well as a fantastic opportunity to learn and to be more aware of the world I live in.
The lessons I learned in the Lab helped me during the next few months of my life as I worked for Utah State University Extension and completed my student teaching in an elementary school resource room. I started looking for a job in December of 2010. During the process of submitting applications and interviewing, I stopped by the AT Lab to say hello and see how things were going. When Stan heard that I had not found a job yet, he told me we needed to talk. He said he was leaving and that the AT Lab Coordinator position would be open. I applied, and after a very quick week, I began training with Stan. The more time I spent with him, the more nervous I became, as I realized how many things I would be responsible for.

Since being left to coordinate everything on my own, I have learned that I really have so many supports and resources and am in no way left to do it on my own. The UATP is a team of people who accept each other for their weakness and expect everyone to share their strengths.

I see the services provided positively affect lives every day. It affects my life, the students’ lives, and the consumers’ lives as they participate in creating and using AT devices.