

American Dreaming: Cara Heizman **Cathy Heizman**

April, 1999



Cathy Heizman, left,
and Cara Heizman

Cara Heizman

Since her graduation from high school in 1997, Cara Heizman, 21, of Cincinnati, has found many things she likes to do.

“I like to hang out with my friends, play golf, and play the piano. I used to play softball.”

“A bright future would be living in my own apartment. I’d like to learn to drive. I work in the bakery at Krogers. I want to keep working there.”

“I used to want to live at home forever but now I want my own apartment. I’m not ready yet. I think I’ll move in the year 2000.”

How did she develop these ideas about the future?

“My parents helped me. My dad taught me math and my mom taught me English.”

“I can be home by myself overnight. I know how to cook and do laundry. I have my own bank account and ATM card. I buy my own things.”

“I went to college and took some classes. I had to ride the bus. It was scary at first but I learned it. My mom made me.”

What keeps Cara going as she tries new things and takes on new responsibilities?

“I just grew up and made decisions for myself. I’m an adult now and I can do my own things.”

“I have two brothers. One is away at college and one is a senior in high school. I want to be like my brothers. They go out and do things, too.”

Cathy Heizman

Cara's family has supported her move from high school to college.

"She wanted to go [to college], because her brother was going. They have always been in the same grade and are very, very close. I have a friend whose son has been going to college and living in a fraternity house. I thought, 'He can do it. We could do this.'

"For now college is a nice nurturing place for her. We have found a place for her where she is very competent. She feels a real part of the school. Any time you try something new, you want to see if it's going to work and if the people around her are going to be flexible and creative. When they prove that they are, and she's able to do that, then it's fine.

"Cara had been in college a couple of years. We had a couple of years before we had to think of where we were going next, and everything was good. One day she was fired. My husband and I both said, 'This is really for life, isn't it? Somebody's going to have to advocate for her the rest of her life.' I can't imagine that she's ever going to be able to do that 100 percent by herself. But I've quit doing it for her. I am pushing her to advocate for herself."

Learning from experience

"We are thrilled to death with the progress Cara has made since she's been out of high school, the problem solving, the independence, the self-confidence. She really is a much different person than she was a couple of years ago.

'This is really for life,
isn't it?'

"The simple act of riding the bus in a big city, going downtown and transferring, paying, doing that problem solving, has been a real growing experience for her. She'll say, 'The rates change after Labor Day. After than it's a dollar twenty, so I need to go to the bank and get singles and dimes.'

"Last year, she got lost. They changed the bus schedule over Christmas break and we didn't know it. She was missing for about an hour and a half. She called me and said, 'I don't think I'm in the right place.' There is a lot of skill development that comes with that. She'll say, 'I did the right thing, didn't I, Mom?' 'Yeah, the perfect thing to do.'

"We have faith in her, that she makes good decisions. She makes decisions and lives with the consequences. Don't you think you do that with your other children? They earn your confidence by showing you that they are competent, trustworthy people."

Employment

"Cara has worked four summers at a sports center. It's got malibu raceway, batting cages and putt-putt. She counts out the golf balls and makes sure they are in the right bucket, sells tokens for the batting cages, keeps the golf equipment clean and neat. She can set her own pace, and she knows what her tasks are for the day. She works best that way.

"We've never had any help from anybody, because we were able to do it by ourselves, and also because the sources are so limited in our county. We could certainly use some help from BVR [Bureau of Vocational Rehabilitation], but she already has a job. They really are into finding people initial placement.

“One year we did hire a job coach who was a friend of ours. After the first week, her boss said, ‘I don’t know what that woman is doing here. We don’t need her.’ So, thanks, but we don’t need you anymore.”

Cara hasn’t yet made a decision about future career directions.

“We had thought she might want to do some child care. She thought she did, too, then she had a job in a summer camp one year, and she really didn’t like that. Not only did we learn that she didn’t want to work in child care, we also realized some of the reasons.”

Planning for life after college

Cara and her family are beginning to plan for a future beyond college.

“As she starts her junior year, we are thinking that pretty soon we have to make some plans about what we are going to do. School was a struggle. We deserved this break. But this is not a career, and Cara is not going to be that token retarded kid on campus. When she ages out, she’s done, and we’ll move on to something else.

“Moving out will be a major deal, but we are all getting ready for it. Before, I don’t think she had any context for it. She knew her brother was going away to school, but I’m not really sure she knew what that meant. Now he’s in his third year, and now she knows.

“Last year she came home at the end of the school year and said, ‘I need to talk to you. I don’t know what I’m going to do with my life.’ I said, ‘Talk to your brother; he has no clue either!’ It’s not all about disability. Some of it is because you’re 19.”

She said,
‘I need to talk to you.
I don’t know what
I’m going to do with my life.’

A good future

Cathy’s vision of a bright future for Cara includes work she enjoys and a good place to live.

“I want her to make some money, because she’s really validated by that. I just want her to have the opportunities to enjoy everything in the world. I want the freedom for her to be whoever she wants to be and do whatever she wants to do.

“I change my mind probably four times a day about living independently. I struggle with that, but I suspect that we’ll just go ahead. Cara would have to pick who she wanted to live with. I would never put her in a position where somebody else made that choice. Cara would literally shrivel up and die in a group home or a sheltered workshop.

“I am sure we will have to financially support her. I am not going to have sons who have hot tubs and BMWs in the driveway and Cara living above the dry cleaners. Once we finish college expenses, there’s a condo unit where she can walk to the mall, the grocery store, the drug store, the shoe store. There’s a bus stop. She would need somebody to check in. She doesn’t drive, so even walking to the store and bringing groceries home can be a pain.”

Commitment to change

"I was active in war protest in school. I marched for civil rights. I always had this sense of fighting for justice, and this is an injustice. My blood gets going when I hear about young people and families that are discriminated against, not given a chance. There is this gut-wrenching sense of, by God, we are going to make this right.

"Cara has been a gift to me. I was an English teacher. That's what I would have done the rest of my life and never have developed the skills, or more importantly the relationships, I developed. I have been different places in the state and had people say, 'I heard you speak, or I saw your newsletter, and it changed my life, or gave me hope.' What a gift that has been, to be able to pull from yourself things you didn't know you were ever capable of doing."

The hardest step is turning it over to our sons and daughters.

Turning it over

"In my generation, parent training was a new thing. We did a hell of a job. I think everybody expects parents to be advocates now. The hardest step is turning it over to our sons and daughters. We did a really poor job of that. We made a serious mistake of not doing that much sooner.

"Cara still falls into that trap of wanting to please. 'Tell me what the answer is you are going for, and I'll give it to you.' We're not letting her get away with that. 'Tell us what you want to do.' Then, once she has told us, we have to honor that."

How have my family and friends helped me to have more control and direction of my own life?

How do I help my son or daughter and my friends have more control and direction of their lives?

American Dreaming is published by a Self-Determination Project: Removing the Mask and developed through a Grant from the Ohio Developmental Disabilities Council. Contact us at: Removing the Mask, Ohio Association of County Boards of MR/DD, 73 East Wilson Bridge Road #B-1, Worthington, OH 43085. All opinions are those of Removing the Mask and do not necessarily reflect those of the Council.

