



Don Campbell / HP staff

Kaitlyn Mettler, a nursing support associate at Lakeland Regional Medical Center, poses Tuesday at her St. Joseph home. Mettler, a 2009 Lakeshore High School grad, was diagnosed with dyslexia and a borderline cognitive learning disability when she was in third grade. After high school, Mettler became a certified nursing assistant. She plans to get a four-year degree in business and communication with the goal of continuing to work in health care and do some motivational public speaking on the side.

# Support system

Navigating college can be tough for students with learning disabilities, but help is available

By DEBRA HAIGHT  
HP Correspondent

Lake Michigan College student Kaitlyn Mettler has a message for others like her who have a learning disability and want to go to college: Don't think about what diagnosis you've been given. Instead, fight for what you want to accomplish.

Mettler, a 2009 Lakeshore High School graduate, was diagnosed with dyslexia and a borderline cognitive learning disability when she was in third grade. While that diagnosis put her in special education classes when she was younger, she didn't let that keep her from dreaming and working to achieve those dreams.

"From elementary school on, I was told to self-advocate since I am the only one who knows if I need help," she said. "They taught me to self-advocate and to always ask for help, so making the transition to college was easy for me."

A St. Joseph woman has started a new business to help people with learning disabilities and who may not have

had the support and encouragement Mettler had. Loretta Holmes started Bella Transition Services to reach those with disabilities, drawing on her experience as a special education teacher.

"I was a special education teacher in Buchanan for several years at the secondary level," she said. "It was during that time when I realized there was a lack of support for students with disabilities who were transitioning to higher education."

"The idea to start Bella began at that time but I wanted to take time to learn about launching and owning a business. I supported and advised many students and families in the community to gain knowledge in regards to what services were needed and what services families wanted. I spent a lot of time talking to families and students with disabilities."

## New thinking, new success

On her way to starting her new business, Holmes also went back to earn a master's degree in education and certificates in educational therapy

and as an executive functioning brain coach.

She noted that the assistance she provides goes well beyond helping students and parents navigate the college admission process. "The admission process is the least difficult thing," she said. "The most challenging journey of attending higher education for a student with a disability is structure as well as adjusting to free time."

"It can be challenging for one to budget their time and remain focused with their goals," she added. "I see frustration, therefore, I offer support while attending college. My support does not cease after the admission process ... I help students with time management, organization skills, study skills, and when to discontinue they have a disability."

"Lastly, I see students who believe they can't attend college because of their disability," she said. "My tag line is 'New thinking. New Success.' I work on changing their thought process that they can be successful by increasing their self-esteem and self-confidence."

Holmes sees her role as one of being both a facilitator and educator, easing the way for students to make the transition from high school to college and providing them with information they might not know such as the availability of scholarships and other assistance.

Parents and students also may not know the differences between what high schools and colleges have to do when it comes to special education. For example, colleges may require additional documentation of the learning disability than the Individualized Educational Plan most students have.

It's been a few years since Cassandra Mills was preparing to make the transition from high school to college, but she can still remember the frustrations she felt in trying to navigate everything she had to do to get into college.

Like Mettler, she notes that college wasn't something she was even thinking about when she was in high school. She

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graduated from Buchanan High School in 2008 and had Holmes as a teacher. She ended up attending both LMC and Southwestern Michigan College and currently works for Lakeland as a phlebotomist.

"She took us around to learn about different careers in our junior year," she said. "She was there to help us study and to teach us things we needed to know outside of school like balancing a checkbook. I wasn't thinking of

college and had no college plans before that ... I don't think I'd be in the medical field without her help."

Berrien Springs resident Betty Weaver remembers how Holmes worked with her children to overcome their disabilities and encouraged them to make the transition from high school to college and then to careers. Holmes also inspired Weaver to go back and get her high school diploma 22 years later.

"Helping a special education student to get into college is hard," she said. "They have to work 20 times harder than other students, people don't un-

derstand how hard they have to work. My son was bullied and my daughter ended up with an ulcer in high school ... She helped them and explained things we didn't understand."

### Proving people wrong

After high school, Mettler first went to a trade school in Cassopolis to get her training to be a certified nursing assistant. She then went to work at Lakeland, where she is a nursing support associate.

Her goal now is to get a four-year degree in business and communication with the goal of continuing to work in health care

and do some motivational public speaking on the side. Right now, she's going slowly and taking one college class at a time, partly because she doesn't want to accumulate a lot of debt.

"People wouldn't imagine me going to college and getting a job, I've proved a lot of people wrong," she said. "I think if you have to struggle and put more effort into something, you appreciate what you accomplish more. When things come easy, you don't realize how valuable what you've learned is."

The types of help she got in middle and high

school have continued for the most part in college with an extra emphasis on things like time management. For example, she can get extra time to complete a test or can take it in a quiet place without distractions rather than in class. She also can have someone read assignments to her.

One of the things that has helped her a lot is using the Dragon Speak program to write papers. The program translates her verbal talk into a written paper.

"People shouldn't be afraid of failing; failure is not the end of the world,"

she said. "Just make another attempt and learn your strengths and weaknesses along the way."

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