

# I KNOW THE NEXT DOOR I WANT TO OPEN

## My Introduction to Syracuse

I always knew that Syracuse University had a long and rich history of disability culture and that they trained their K through 12 teachers to work respectfully with ALL children. After speaking at two big conferences last August 2011 at Syracuse University (SU) sponsored by the School of Education, I just loved being at a place that really “got” inclusion and disability. I really felt at home.

While I was still at SU last August, I approached Julie Causton-Theoharis, one of the conference organizers and a professor in the school of education, to set up a meeting with her and George Theoharis (another professor). They told me to write a letter to Dean of Education, Doug Biklen, indicating my interest in working here. That was the beginning of many long conversations about how both I and SU (Syracuse University) could benefit by my coming here.

After the close of the two conferences, I returned to Michigan where I have been living for my entire life. I was determined to make Syracuse my new home and I wanted it to happen by January. Julie introduced me to Pat Fratangelo at Onondaga Community Living. We then began Skype phone calls with the group. Many people wondered if I could make that dream happen in just six months. I couldn't think about IF I could make it happen, I could only think about HOW I could make that happen. Over the next six months, we had several conference calls and Skype calls to discuss how we can work together. I knew I had to build my circle of support right away.

In November, I saw Wendy Harbour, another education professor, at a conference and she told me that she had two job opportunities for me at Syracuse University. During that same month I returned to SU to speak in Julie Causton-Theoharis' education class. I was making more and more connections. It seemed definite that I would be moving here. I was excited.

## Planning to Move

Once I knew it was definite that I was coming to Syracuse, I worked with Pat and drafted a housing flyer that I wrote on Facebook and sent it to my Syracuse email list --- which was getting bigger every week! I found a place to live within walking

distance of the university. I found someone whose roommate was moving out, and I contacted her. I was able to see the room and the house in November.

Next, I had to find an agency to partner with. Jessica Bacon, PhD student at Syracuse, who is on the Onondaga Community Living (OCL) board, recommended OCL. I liked OCL because they believe in giving people choices and understand how to treat people with disabilities. They clearly believed in me as a person.



## Arrival Time

I arrived in Syracuse on January 13, and have been working at SU as a graduate assistant. I help teach a class in the school of education with my friend Michelle Damiani, a doctoral student. Part of my employment includes working with a program called Peer-to-Peer, which links college students with other college students with disabilities. I am also helping with a campaign called “I Am Norm” at Liverpool High School and am part of a disability rights group, Beyond Compliance Coordinating Committee, and a sign language club, both at SU.

I have lots of people that are helping me since moving here.

Over the years, I have opened many doors with the help of many people. It all started when I told my parents that I wanted to go in the same door at school as my friends in second grade. Opening this newest door in Syracuse happened in just six months. Not only do I feel at home, now I am at home, my new home in Syracuse. *By Micah Fialka-Feldman.*