

# The Courage to be first

Students with developmental disabilities join TCNJ's class of 2010

**By Robert Stern**

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EWING – Ashley DiMattia has lived with cerebral palsy all her life and at one time didn't know if she would be college material. But for the past four years, the Bordentown resident has proved again and again that, despite her disability, she is quite capable of handling the college experience. Yesterday, DiMattia and five other students with developmental disabilities who made up the inaugural class of The College of New Jersey's career and community studies program graduated alongside 1,961 other TCNJ seniors who made up the class of 2010.

"As someone with disabilities, you don't know if you can go to college," DiMattia said. Not only did she go to college, she graduated with a job in hand—a feat for any student in this challenging economy.

DiMattia will be working as an office assistant for the Progressive Center for Independent Living in Hamilton, which helps people with disabilities live independently.

Her time at TCNJ has enriched her, she said, by helping her make valuable connections to people and to be seen apart from her disability.

"I met a lot of people that I'm friends with and don't have disabilities who don't look at me as someone with disabilities," she said.

TCNJ's career and community studies program was launched four years ago. Yesterday, in a certificate-conferring ceremony for the graduates, which followed the college-wide commencement, the program's first graduating class won praise for its efforts and accomplishments from faculty and from the program's keynote speaker, Barnes & Noble CEO and Vice Chairman Stephen Riggio.

"You've had the courage to be the first, the dignity to lead your underclassmen in your footsteps, but let's call them giant footsteps. We wish you success," said Riggio, who along with his wife, Laura, provided key funding for the TCNJ disabilities program through a grant from the National Down Syndrome Society.

The Riggios' late daughter, Melissa, had Down syndrome and died from leukemia as she and her parents were contemplating options for her post-secondary education.

It was Melissa's curiosity, passion for learning and drive to overcome her challenges that inspired her parents to help promote higher education for students with disabilities, her father said.

"The import work of including people with disabilities in all aspects of our society, including a wide range of educational opportunities, is no less urgent, no less grand, no less critical than the fight for civil rights that I fought for in the '60s and the fight for women's rights," Riggio said.

He noted that a primary goal of the TCNJ program and of its sister program at Mercer County Community College was that they were to become models that can be replicated at colleges across the country.

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There were only 35 colleges and universities across the country with programs geared to students with developmental disabilities when TCNJ started its program. Today there are more than 250 such programs across the country, Riggio said.

Joey Clawson of Ewing said he is proud to be among the TCNJ program's first graduates. Clawson, who has autism and is an enthusiastic Philadelphia sports fan, also has a job lined up after graduation. He will be working in food services on campus for Sodexo, he said. But as an avid athlete who likes to compete in just about any sport, his dream job is to coach youth or Special Olympics athletes, he said.

The program's other four graduates are John Russo of Hamilton, Katie Kim of West Windsor, Asim Safdar of Princeton and Brian Danser of Egg Harbor.

"You are the trailblazers," Richard Blumberg, co-director of the program, told the graduates. "You have taught us how to create an inclusive campus community. You have made us proud and you have changed this campus community forever. You have made it a special place."

Rebecca Daley, the program coordinator, said it has been her privilege to get to know each of the six students and grow alongside them.

"You have and will continue to inspire others by showing that with courage, tenacity and enthusiasm, anything is possible," Daley said.

In addition to the career and community studies program, TCNJ also awarded 457 graduate degrees yesterday.