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Helping out younger students in District 917

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Family donates sensory kits to students with sensory processing differences

A Dakota County family is giving back to help students with sensory processing differences.

Deborah Gee-Tritschler, her husband Brian Flagg and their son Devin Flagg donated 65 Fraser Sensory Kits to Intermediate School District 917 in Rosemount.

The sensory kits will help students enrolled in the school's autism program with their sensory processing differences, so they can be more comfortable at school and focus easier.

Sensory processing differences are common in people with autism, but also those with anxiety, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and other emotional or behavioral issues. People with sensory processing differences may feel overwhelmed by loud noises, bright lights, strong smells, crowds, and other sensory input. That can cause extreme discomfort and leave little room for focusing on anything else.

Devin Flagg has autism and superior canal dehiscence syndrome in both ears. His condition means he has "exquisitely sensitive ears to sound," and it has made navigating many spaces particularly hard.

Despite his challenges, Devin earned an associate's degree in accounting from Dakota County Technical College, which is housed in the same building as ISD 917. It was in the hallways there a spark of this idea grew.

Devin said he would see students from ISD 917 in the hallway and noticed some were struggling with sensory input at the school.

"The bright, humming florescent lights, intense smells from the woodworking and automotive classrooms and the noise of changing classes were, at times, overwhelming stimuli for me, too. I wanted to help these students modify their environment and give them the tools to do so," Devin said in a press release.

Working with his parents, Devin reached out to Fraser and was connected to Fraser Sensory Supports and Training Manager Gina Brady. Brady created the Fraser Sensory Kits to help people with sensory processing differences participate in more

experiences and events in the community.

The family decided the kits would be the right fit for what they were hoping to do.

“We wanted to empower kids to modify their environment,” Gee-Tritschler said. “But more than that, we wanted to validate that what they’re hearing and feeling is normal.”

Sound sensitivity is common among people with autism spectrum disorder.

According to the Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders, “The reported prevalence of sensory sensitivities in people with ASD is high (from) 60 to 96%.”

Devin has always struggled with sensitivity to sound, a December 2022 story from Fraser said.

He was diagnosed with autism by TEACCH at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill when he was about 3 years old.

Before his autism diagnosis, Devin struggled with speaking and thinking clearly, controlling his body, and extreme pain when he ate certain foods.

It was his food sensitivity that triggered his autism diagnosis along with a finding that he had a gluten and casein allergy.

While the family managed his food allergy through his diet, Devin’s sensitivity to sound was harder to diagnose.

Though Devin had been seen by audiologists, the root of his hearing sensitivity wasn’t diagnosed until August 2022 by Dr. William Garvis, an ear, nose, and throat doctor and a skull-based surgeon.

A CT scan revealed Devin had superior canal dehiscence syndrome (SCDS) in both his ears.

SCDS is caused by an abnormal opening between the uppermost semicircular canal in the upper part of the inner ear and the brain.

Devin has incredibly sensitive hearing, and low-frequency sounds are greatly amplified for him.

People can have surgery to repair SCDS, but Devin isn't sure that he wants to do surgery, the Fraser story said.

In the meantime, he plans to continue to wear his "gun range headphones" and his 3M construction-grade earplugs.

More research needs to be done on this rare condition; it's typically diagnosed in concussion patients. But at least one study suggests it occurs more often in people with autism.

Despite his challenges, Devin graduated with an associate's degree in accounting from DCTC and a bachelor's degree in accounting from Metropolitan State University in December 2021. Devin credits some of his success to the help he received from Fraser Career Planning and Employment.

Fraser Assistant Program Manager of CPE Julie McKibbins helped Devin create a one-page profile to raise awareness about his autism and help his professors at DCTC understand his learning style. McKibbins also helped him make his first resume, which he has been using as he searches for an accounting position.

Dealing with his "exquisitely sensitive ears" is hard, of course. But more challenging, Devin says, is how it limits his ability to attend social events because of loud music or other high-pitched noises. Ringing bells, whistles, and hand dryers also sound incredibly loud to Devin, as does piped-in music in places like restaurants and stores. Many people also lack knowledge and understanding about sensory sensitivities and understanding about other accommodations people with autism might need.

“Autistic individuals perceive their environment/reality very differently compared to neurotypical individuals, and it creates a gap that has been preventing autistic individuals from being able to prove that they can live and work just as the neurotypical individuals, with proper modifications to their environment,” Devin said in the Fraser story. “This gap has been left unchecked for far too long. Our society must strive to aid individuals with autism by being more open-minded, and seeing autism as a valuable asset rather than perceiving it as a defective liability.”