



# Looking Toward the Future with Marcus

# PAWsitive Possibilities

By **Tammy Flynn**

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HAVING RAISED A SON BORN WITH DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES AND SIGNIFICANT CHRONIC, COMPLEX MEDICAL ISSUES, I CAN SAY I HAVE BECOME A MASTER AT LOOKING FOR AND ADAPTING THE PAWSITIVE POSSIBILITIES. IT TOOK A LOT OF EXPERIENCE TO GET TO THIS PLACE. IN FACT, I WOULD DESCRIBE THOSE EARLY YEARS AS FACING A TORNADO, HURRICANE, AND TYPHOON ALL AT ONCE!

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**T**rying to figure out the lay of the land while also trying to navigate and advocate can definitely be a bit RUFF. You leave no stone unturned as you explore all that is PAWSible for your child—researching schools, services, and resources to give your child/young adult with exceptional needs the best quality of life and opportunities that bring fulfillment and purpose. You spend so much of your time promoting, perfecting your toolbox to help them face life's challenges.

But, just as you finally mastered how to navigate the storm, you blink your eyes, and 21 years have passed by in an instant. Suddenly, your young adult is aging out of the school system, and the lay of the land has changed once again. They are now bridging from entitlement to eligibility services, which creates an enormous gap for both you and your child in areas of support, activities, and opportunities. This leaves most parents wondering what's next.

As we watch this process taking place—our children bridging out of the school system and moving into young adulthood—we long for them to find/have purpose and meaning in all they do. To find somewhere that provides a safe environment where they feel they belong and have a sense of community, whether that's through employment, volunteering, or simply outside activities and opportunities that maximize their talents combined with the things they are passionate about.

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*“I think for all parents, aside from wanting a safe place for our young adults to go each day, it is most important to us that they are happy! We want them to feel as if they are a part of something more—to wake up each day feeling they have purpose and a place to belong.”*

Of course, it would be PAWSitively perfect if these opportunities were awaiting them after graduation. Unfortunately, it's a bit RUFF! The gap is enormous, with minimal resources and opportunities that make it feel insurmountable. Our children (now young adults) transition from having an eight-hour school day with structure, support, education, encouragement, and community, to completely wrapping up their childhood (and all the services that come with it) on graduation day. It's a bittersweet moment as we head home from that milestone of a day with an “at best” scenario of potentially a few hours a day of random, scattered opportunities.

As a parent, I was aware this transition was coming. And like most parents would, I thought I was seasoned and experienced enough to do a good job planning ahead. I assumed three years would give us plenty of time to seek out and secure PAWSitive and enriching opportunities for my son. I think for all parents, aside from wanting a safe place for our young adults to go each day, it is most important to us that they are happy! We want them to feel as if they are a part of something more—to wake up each day feeling they have purpose and a place to belong. We want them to find meaningful opportunities that help them to use their amazing talents and give them a deeper sense of self-worth every day.

I spent the first three years post-graduation continuously and relentlessly searching for those opportunities with little success. Eventually, I realized we needed to put on our PAWSitive thinking caps and get creative.

I asked these questions about Marcus:

- What does he love to do most?
- What makes him the happiest?
- What holds his attention for the longest period of time?
- What are some of his greatest strengths?
- What skills would I like him to learn?
- When does he feel most proud of himself?
- Who does he want to help or give back to?
- How does he express his creativity?

The answers to the questions above led us in a specific direction.

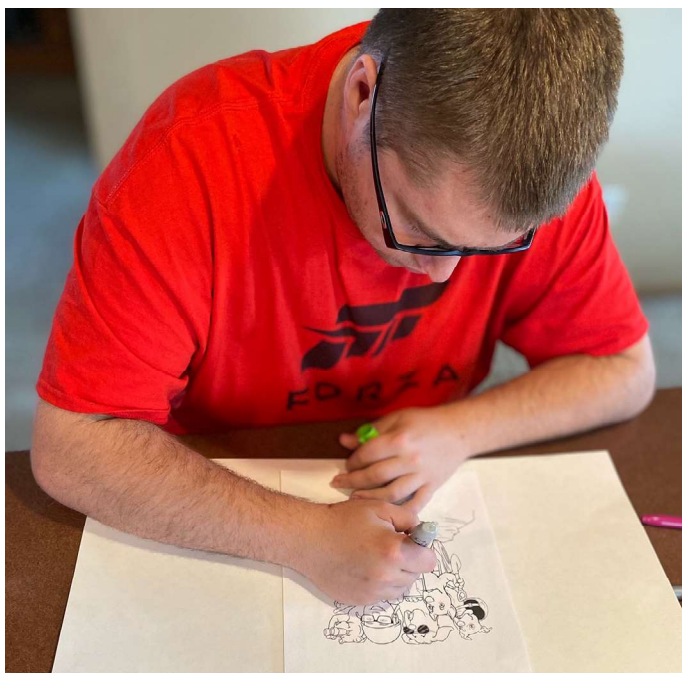
Marcus loves to color. From regular coloring books to adult coloring books, they all make him happy! Additionally, in high school, he would volunteer in the kid's room and color with them. It brought him joy, and he would always come out of the art room beaming with pride.

Marcus also *loves* dogs. Though he is allergic to some breeds, that has never stopped him from wanting to help out in any way possible. Whether it is walking dogs at the animal shelter, donating to dog organizations, watching dog videos, or learning about different breeds, he is passionate about making a difference in the life of puppies everywhere.

This started our PAWSome thoughts flowing, wondering how we could combine his two greatest loves, add a component allowing him to give back to his precious pups, and sprinkle in learning some great life skills, all to create a model of purpose and meaningful opportunities for those with different abilities.

We're proud to introduce you to *Mission Marcus: Operation PAWSible*—a website dedicated to Marcus and the dogs he loves! Because of Marcus's medical issues, we had a website and social media that we regularly used to keep everyone close to us updated on his conditions. Since Marcus is rela-





tively stable at this time, we decided to put a PAWsitive twist on the website and repurpose it for his new mission. For years, Marcus's online following had supported him during his time of need, and now he would have the opportunity to pay it forward by leveraging the site to support his furry friends!

Marcus had an active role in creating the theme and logo, choosing his favorite real-life dogs to be his mascots. The concept is simple: for a small price, you can purchase a coloring "masterpiece" by Marcus, and a portion of the proceeds will support a dog charity.

Here's how it works: Visit the site to contribute and choose which dog you would like to have colored just for you! We have a workstation in our kitchen set up with everything Marcus needs to complete an order. When you place an order, we get an email notification, and Marcus starts the order fulfillment process by printing off the intake sheet. Next, he chooses the proper dog coloring sheet, colors the "masterpiece," and writes you a special message. Then, he addresses and stamps the envelope. A few times a week, we head to the post office so he can drop each masterpiece in the mailbox. He is so proud each time he drops off his mail! Once a month, he helps address the envelopes and mail out the donations to the chosen dog rescues and dog organizations.

An additional fun feature on the Mission Marcus website is the "Pup of the Week." Anyone can nominate their dog by submitting a photo and explaining why their dog is PAWsome and should be featured!

Though I have to upload the photos, I read each submission to Marcus, and he picks who will be chosen as the pup of the week.

Mission Marcus: Operation PAWsible is less than a year old, and we are still in the process of making adjustments and tweaking things to see what works best! As with any new journey, we have learned by trial and error, been through a ton of revisions, and continue looking long-term at how we can get other differently-abled young adults involved in creating their own PAWsitive mission.

We have already accomplished exciting things during our first year, such as sending out cards and letters to family and friends, inviting them to get involved with us. Additionally, we sought out vendor booth opportunities to share his mission with others. We recently launched our new shopping page where supporters can get goodies for themselves and their pup along with some wonderful gifts for family and friends!

Though this model doesn't solve all of the RUFF obstacles our young adults face as they bridge out of the school system, it does provide PAWsitive possibilities for exploring where your child's abilities intersect with what they love to do. Mission Marcus has addressed one of our biggest goals—to see Marcus doing something that has great purpose and meaning to him and to give him something that is his, that he loves, and that he can find joy and community within. When I see him smiling, proud of his artwork and how he is helping his furry friends, that is true joy!



*Tammy Flynn, The On-Air Advocate, is a mother of four with over 23 years of experience as a caregiver to her son with special needs. Acknowledging first-hand that there is a gap in auditory information, she launched The On-Air Advocate back in November of 2017 to provide a variety of education and support that can be accessed twenty-four-seven through the use of a weekly podcast, educational videos, classes, courses, and an online Facebook community. Flynn looks to take her listeners beyond the brochure to explore, educate, and bring clarity to community supports, resources, navigational tools, and planning strategies with impactful collaboration of individual stories and journeys that will not only educate but inspire.*

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