



Hitting the **MARK**

Wyatt Symons is a typical teenager. He wears a ball cap and a letterman jacket with DRUM LINE in bold letters on the back. He smiles when he talks about playing percussion in the Belle Vernon High School marching band and he's particularly excited because this year he gets to march on the field, instead of having to play from the sidelines. He tells me that once during practice, the band director allowed no excuses for anyone to miss their mark on the field because Wyatt was doing the moves correctly.

In other words, "the blind guy was hitting the mark."
Yes, Wyatt is blind.

I recently met him at Carnegie Mellon University where he and his mother, Victoria, were attending the STEM Career Expo, sponsored by the Pittsburgh Bureau of Blindness and Visual Services (BBVS). Currently a junior at Belle Vernon, Wyatt is hoping to major in music in college, but he is considering a minor in a STEM field (aka science, technology, engineering or math).

"All kinds of organizations are making an impact for persons with disabilities in STEM fields," says BBVS director, Joe Strechay, as he introduces keynote speaker, Brett Humphrey, to a room full of young people, parents and working professionals, such as teachers for the visually impaired, school transition coordinators and orientation and mobility specialists.

Mr. Humphrey, a Senior Program Manager, sports a professorial look with his gray beard, jeans and sports jacket. He has worked at Microsoft for 20 years. Although he was the first legally blind person to graduate from his small school district, he admits that he almost flunked out of college twice.

"The transition from high school to college was horrible," he says.

He learned he was better off asking for help and started to work with the college to make accommodations for his blindness. He eventually graduated, and an internship at Microsoft ended up turning into a full time job and career.

Mr. Humphrey is one of several professionals who are at the Expo to encourage blind and visually impaired youth to consider STEM careers. In one breakout session, several Pittsburgh-area professionals talk about their personal journeys working in STEM-related fields.

UPMC pharmacist, Krista King, explains how important it is to self-advocate, have an open mind and be positive.

"Every day is hard," she encourages. "Never give up."

Ren Wang, a database administrator, points out that "blind individuals are excellent problem solvers in really practical ways."

When I pop into Denna Lambert's workshop, the kids are busy planning a NASA mission. Ms. Lambert, a Program Manager with NASA's Goddard Space Flight Center, has divided the group into three teams and has instructed each team to build a space vehicle using the materials scattered on each table, like tape, bubble wrap, foil, binder clips, modeling clay, plastic straws and cardboard oatmeal boxes.

"There's only one problem," I overhear one girl say. "Those straws are not humans."

The room buzzes as the teens talk, tape, touch and pass their vehicles around the table so each person can "feel" how it is shaping up. When time is up, each team reports what their mission was and explains how they designed their vehicle to support their mission.

"What you have done in 30 minutes takes years working on a mission," Ms. Lambert tells them.

When I have an opportunity to sit down with the Joe Strechay and BBVS District Administrator, Shannon Austin, I learn about the services that BBVS specifically provides for children, like counseling and guidance, adjustment to blindness counseling, advocacy in IEP meetings, diagnostic services, vocational rehabilitation services, access technology and referral for instructional services and equipment.

"OVR's annual budget requires us to spend 15 percent or \$20 million annually on Pre-Employment Transition Services for students with disabilities from 14 through 21 years of age," Joe explains.

During events like the STEM Career Expo, the agency talks to parents, reaches out to employers and tries to do more to expose visually impaired kids to the types of jobs that are available to them.

"Blind students are doing all kinds of careers. They may not be airline pilots or taxi drivers," Joe laughs, "but BBVS wants to make sure they know what is possible."

As he says this, I think of Wyatt and the kids building spaceships and I feel grateful for the work that BBVS does to help blind and visually impaired kids to keep hitting the mark. ■



Wyatt Symons



STEM-Denna Lambert

Ann K. Howley enjoys writing about STEAM education in Pittsburgh.