

1 million Florida scholarships, 1 million opportunities for success

By Donna Berman



My late son Brandon began experiencing seizures at age 3 and was diagnosed with autism by 6. He spent his youth growing up with muscular dystrophy, an auditory processing disorder, cortical atrophy, and a brain tumor. Brandon was also non-verbal and his teachers believed he might never learn how to read.

No class setting – public or private, mainstream or hospital homebound – was adequately meeting Brandon’s needs. Brandon was a space age kid living in a stone age system.

Thankfully, we live in Florida, where choice in education is increasingly mainstream, and more and more options that can help kids like Brandon are becoming a reality.

This week, Step Up for Students, Florida’s largest nonprofit education scholarship administrator, announced it had awarded its 1 millionth scholarship since its founding in 2002. Brandon was one of those scholarship recipients, so I know how much of a difference they’ve made for families across this state.

Before Brandon received a scholarship, I faced a constant battle to ensure he received an adequate education. I began to feel like his federal rights under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) weren’t worth the paper they were written on.

Eventually, Brandon’s daily seizures at school required me to care for him at home, and it ultimately cost me my career as a registered nurse.

I thought I was dreaming in 2014 when I learned about

a new education scholarship program for students with special needs, now called the Gardiner Scholarship. Gardiner gives parents access to a flexible spending account, averaging about \$10,000 a year, that can be used to pay for school tuition, fees, textbooks, school supplies, assistive technology, therapies and more.

Applying for this scholarship was a no-brainer – I had already tried every other option. Once Brandon was awarded the scholarship, I was in full control of my son’s education.

Gardiner paid for curriculum, class supplies, and helped make various projects possible. I could find a million unique ways to teach Brandon math, improve finger dexterity, learn how to plan projects, and even develop his social skills. Whether he was learning math by sewing, baking, or folding boxes at the local pizza shop, the Gardiner program ensured Brandon’s learning could happen anywhere.

Brandon could learn in the car, on the way to the doctor, at the hospital. No longer bound to learn between brick walls, Brandon became the space age kid he was meant to be.

Traditional paper books intimidated Brandon with the number of words per page. Instead of paper books, I downloaded books onto an E-Reader and increased the font size. With fewer words on the screen Brandon found learning to read less frightening.

Against the odds, Brandon learned to love reading; “The Box Car Children” became his favorite series. He also became self-sufficient, eventually learning how to use his tablet to download and read restaurant menus and order food for himself.

That may not sound like a big deal, but when you have a child with special needs, little moments of progress like this can bring tears of joy to a parent’s eyes.

Brandon and I were such enthusiastic members of the Gardiner family that we defended the scholarship in court when opponents sued to dissolve it. After we won, Brandon made tremendous progress in the first year alone.

My son passed away in 2017, but I’m forever grateful Brandon finally got the chance to learn at his own pace. In his last years he discovered a love for learning, and he found self-worth.

I look forward to seeing a million more scholarships awarded, and a million more children find success just as Brandon did.