

THE STATE OF MAINE, OFFICE OF
AGING AND DISABILITY SERVICES
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SELF-DIRECTION IN ACTION

Travis's Story

THE AUTUMN LEAVES HAVE DROPPED and let the light and the expansive view of a lake in western Maine come flooding into the Wheeler family cabin along the shore. Burnished exposed wood, camp blankets, and hallways of family photos warm up the space even more. This generational home holds so much love—and hope.

It also holds a *lot* of vintage vinyl records. Travis's collection has been built over a decade and holds pride of place in the living room and quite a bit of storage in the basement, and his eyes light up as he shares his passion for music. "My first record was Carole King, and I thought *Wait a minute, this is really cool*. And then I found BLM and thought it was even cooler. I went to the record stop and thought, *I need more of these*. I have Dylan, the Rolling Stones, all the classics."

Home may hold their hearts but Travis and his mother, Paula, are community-minded to their core. Enjoying the Maine outdoors is particularly important to them both. But like many families receiving caregiving services in Maine, COVID created significant challenges.

"Travis is really smart but he can't move as well as other people. He doesn't look disabled but has seizures, he has cerebral palsy. He was supposed to get involved with an agency but when COVID hit, it was pushed back or canceled," Paula explains. "It was so hard to get up and go to work in the morning after getting a call from the agency saying the person who knows your house, knows your dogs, and knows Travis can't come in today.



We had some experiences with the transportation company that were scary—he got left a couple of places. It's really hard to put your child in a car and not know where they're going. The agency was doing the best they could but it was very stressful."

"Section 20 changed my life," Travis says. "Now my mom can get me places, like skiing and kayaking and playing hockey with my twin brother and friends. My brother and friends were always talking about how fun skiing is and now I can do it, too."

Self-Direction helped with much more than transportation. The adaptive equipment Travis needs to participate fully in these activities, like his bike and kayak and bi-skis and sledge, are covered as well. "I'm the goalie for hockey," he adds proudly. "I stop the puck."

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“I have a walking group and I go on nature walks. I get my steps in. I can also get to my book group now and Self-Direction pays for my Audible subscription!” he says joyously, holding up an iPad stocked with books across a wide range of subjects. “Book group prompts me to read books I would never read, books I wouldn’t read otherwise, and gets me into the community.”

And while Travis thrives on these physical and intellectual challenges, the greatest gift of Self-Direction is allowing Paula to be his primary caregiver. “She’s always been around,” he says both mischievously and affectionately. “But hiring her is *really* nice.”

With Section 20, Paula was able to retire from her longtime job as a special education teacher to focus on Travis. “You can’t hire love, right?” she laughs. “You can’t hire someone who really wants to see him succeed. That’s the whole thing as a parent—the gift of being able to see him succeed.”

“Travis has overcome every challenge in his life,” she shares proudly. “He was valedictorian of his high school class and he was working so hard not just in his classes but in occupational therapy. He played football.”

Keeping up with Travis’s many interests is a full-time job. “It’s important for people to be able to be involved in their community and to get out and and to feel the love and be part of it,” Paula says. “Travis volunteers, with opportunities that we can find in Bethel. He volunteers

with the Historical Society every July. And we do the book club, and everyone’s like *Hey, Trav!* when he comes in. Those things are really valuable, right? Everybody wants to be known and appreciated and recognized.”

“If we didn’t have Section 20, I would still be working because I would have to, so either he would be home alone or we’d be constantly in flux finding people,” she shares. “Fortunately, we have Shannon a couple of days a week which gives us time to do things that we need to do, as parents, and make appointments and things so the rest of the time we’re free to go take him places and do the things that we feel are important to help him develop both physically and emotionally. We need to help him get that independence. We’re together and he’s here, lighting up our life—right, Trav?”

Travis and Paula both believe Self-Direction can give these same opportunities to others. “Everything comes with a little bit of adaptation. You have to be flexible,” Paula advises. “Find what works for you.”

Travis agrees. “For people in my situation, patience is important. Patience is key. Identify what you like and go find a way to do that.”

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