

# COLLABORATED D U C A T E

## Intern Takeover: The "Lizzie" Edition



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# A Unique Collaboration

By Lizzie Breznay

My name is Lizzie Breznay, and I am a differently-abled individual. My education has required some non-traditional learning strategies as well as specific accommodations to achieve my goals. Although I possess some verbal skills, I am considered non-verbal and learned to communicate my thoughts and feelings using eye-gaze technology. The device that I use, called Tobii Dynavox Eye Gaze Communication, provided a way for me to participate more independently in class, report the weather on my high school in-house television station and even give the commencement speech at my college graduation. The Tobii gives me a voice that others can understand with clarity.

*NOTHING is impossible, the word itself says "I'm Possible"!  
-Audrey Hepburn*

My parents and I always find the proper accommodations that allow me to participate in whatever I want to do. So basically, we never give up. Nothing was impossible, whether it was homework, attending high school football games, being in my high school play, or doing anything in the community. That attitude has carried me throughout my journey.

*Don't give up. I believe in you all. A person's a person no matter how small.  
-Dr. Seuss*

Some of the influential people in my life share their stories of how they have collaborated to educate with compassion, care, dignity, and beyond.



**Preschool 2005**



**High School 2019**



**College 2021**

# A Rewarding Collaboration

## Solomon-Plains Junior High



By John J. Woloski, Jr.

Retired School Administrator



John and Lizzie - June 2019

Collaboration To Educate! If one were to take some time to research what the NEA goals are for collaboration, they would find such statements as " .... where thoughtful collaboration can transform how we work together effectively" or "When we come together, our students benefit the most, and that's what matters." These statements are very true and accurate. But my story, that I'm about to tell, has a bit of a personal twist to it. I hope to show that collaborating to educate Lizzie resulted in her helping me during a low point in my life.

My story begins on a beautiful spring afternoon when I received a phone call, from Central Administration, alerting me that I would be hearing from a parent who has a special needs student who will be attending our school. Since we were one of a few schools that had an elevator, it was determined that our school would meet her needs. After the initial meeting I realized that we would have to make several accommodations to meet Lizzie's educational needs. Areas such as scheduling, physical needs and safety were just a few that needed to be addressed. After discussing these issues with my Assistant Principal, faculty members and other staff members, I realized that our plan for Lizzie and her educational career could be met. If I may add, these needs were met due to our wonderful faculty and staff that presented their thoughts, observations and ideas on practices that they felt were in Lizzie's best interest.

Now for my personal twist. After suffering a paralyzing stroke on February 4, 2015 I knew that it would mark the end of my 35 years in education. After spending over 2 months at Allied Services (John Heinz Rehabilitation Center) I was released to their outpatient department. One particular morning, while in physical therapy, Mark Hiller and his WBRE/WYOU Eyewitness News Team showed up to film a segment on my therapy. As I was proceeding with my exercises, up from behind came Lizzie with all of her smiles and enthusiasm. With tears streaming down my face it was at that moment I realized that she was and always would be my inspiration. Turns out that one of the best outcomes, from that morning taping, was that Mark and Lizzie began a lasting friendship and one where Mark continues to play a major role in Lizzie's life and ambitions.

Looking back in retrospect, that original phone call from Central Administration on that beautiful spring afternoon began my journey of collaboration which led to tremendous academic success for Lizzie. Not to mention an everlasting friendship and inspiration to me.

# Classroom Collaboration

## Solomon-Plains Junior High



By Cathy Richards  
Mathematics Educator



Hello, my name is Cathy Richards, and I have had the privilege of being an educator for 40 years. I taught junior high school level math for the Scranton Diocese for 22 years and then junior high school level math, which includes Pre-Algebra and Advanced Algebra 1, in Wilkes-Barre Area School District for the past 18 years.

Approximately ten years ago, I was blessed with a student who would have an overwhelming impact on me and her classmates. That student was Lizzie Breznay. Lizzie was a student who was categorized as “special needs,” but Lizzie showed everyone that when you focus on a person’s abilities as opposed to any disabilities, you truly can accomplish any goal or dream you may pursue. Although Lizzie was confined to a wheelchair and had difficulty speaking due to her cerebral palsy, she did not let that stop her. The thought of disabilities was not on anyone’s radar.

I had the privilege of teaching Lizzie for both of her years at Solomon Plains Jr. High. Her right hand “man” was her capable, kind, patient, enthusiastic aide, Robin Jones. Robin would attend each class with Lizzie and had been with her since preschool. Everyone in my classroom could see and feel the special rapport Lizzie and Robin shared.

Robin would take the notes in class and copy all of the examples, while Lizzie was able to communicate with Robin through both visual and auditory cues. Lizzie was able to go to the board alongside her classmates and participate in cooperative learning exercises. Lizzie was so intelligent that all of her classmates wanted her in their group for collaborative activities. Lizzie was treated like all of her classmates in all aspects. She would respond when called upon, participate at the board, and work so well with others as partners or in a group. Lizzie and Robin would go to a private area for any assessment so as not to disturb the class.

Lizzie provided a breath of fresh air to our class each day! That sweet, brilliant, lovely young girl never ever had a day where she wasn’t smiling or laughing! She never expressed or displayed one negative thought. She treated everyone with the dignity and respect they deserved, and that’s exactly what was reciprocated back to her! She missed very few days due to sickness and never did anything but her best work daily! To put it simply, Lizzie is an incredible student and has been an inspiration to me and all who are so fortunate to have met her.

Lizzie finished her 8th grade as a member of the National Junior Honor Society and was ranked in the top ten of her more than 200 student class. More importantly, Lizzie taught both me and her classmates what is possible with a positive attitude, a strong work ethic, and a belief in yourself that no matter the obstacles anything really is possible!

I know for a fact that Lizzie not only made me a better teacher, but she has also helped me become a better person!

$$y = mx + b$$

$$ax^2 + bx + c = 0$$

$$d = \sqrt{(x_2 - x_1)^2 + (y_2 - y_1)^2}$$

$$x = \frac{-b \pm \sqrt{b^2 - 4ac}}{2a}$$



# Collaborate to Educate

## Wyoming Area High School



By Jennifer Ciampi  
Secondary School Counselor



I can remember first hearing the name Lizzie Breznay. It was 2015. I was getting a new 9th grade student from another district with some special circumstances. I can remember looking at the paperwork on Lizzie and the services that were in place for her. I wondered, would we be able to give Lizzie what she needed to reach her fullest potential as a student? Lizzie's mom, Helene, told me that first day, we had big shoes to fill. I knew immediately I was up for the mission. If you know Lizzie and her family, then you know how special these people are. You can understand how collaborating with them in Lizzie's education has not only benefited Lizzie with a great educational foundation, some fantastic memories, and a ton of Warrior Pride, but this collaboration has in turn enriched my life personally and professionally, tenfold.

Our first collaboration was picking her first schedule. I never shied away from giving Lizzie every opportunity that any student at Wyoming Area had availed to them. I never looked at Lizzie and thought, this can't be done, my thoughts were always, how we can make this happen. All of our teachers and administrators had the same mindset. Lizzie made it easy for us to do this. She is such a rock star human being. We committed to working together to assist her in meeting her goals for high school and beyond. Wyoming Area has been lucky to have Lizzie in our family. She has changed our school's story forever. When I think back to the beginning of our collaboration, I can recall Lizzie was in a different wheelchair and had to be pushed around all the time. Lizzie was not physically in control of where she was going back then but that did not deter her in the slightest. Lizzie wasn't going to let her chair, or anything really, stand in her way of making her dreams come true. In this spirit, I mention another one of our important collaborations. Working together with the district, the Luzerne Intermediate Unit, Pride Mobility Products, and other agencies, we arranged for Lizzie to practice and test drive her new motorized wheelchair at school. I recall this and need to explain, Lizzie is as powerful as they come. Beneath her petite frame there is gigantic personality and a very powerful presence. On top of all that, she is crazy smart. I have never witnessed a student work so hard, with such determination, than Lizzie. Whether in the classroom or in the community, Lizzie works so hard to make things happen, collaborating with her is a joy.

In collaborating with Lizzie I learned many new things. How to communicate with someone in nontraditional ways and how to be a better listener were just a few. As her school counselor I was the one to establish and assure that she received the accommodations needed when it was time for her to take her SAT's and ACT's. I had to submit an extensive document outlining why it was necessary for Lizzie to have the requested accommodations with assistive technology and otherwise to level the playing field in these high stakes tests. I was also the one who proctored her exams. I will never forget the work Lizzie put into taking those exams and she did so on her own with assistance from her Tobii communication device. It was truly incredible to witness this and something I keep with me to this day. The strength, commitment and perseverance she showed is something I will never forget. It gave me a truly new perspective on tenacity.

Collaborating with Lizzie has been one of the most fulfilling aspects of my career. When we get into this field we hope to make an impact on students but we are continually blessed by the impact our students have on us. I am forever grateful to have worked with Lizzie and can't wait to witness all of her future accomplishments.

# Collaborate to Communicate



Lizzie on the set of  
The WAVE  
Halloween 2018

## Wyoming Area High School



By Charlene Berti

Library Chair



NOW  
SHOWING



Charlene Berti and Lizzie on  
The WAVE Halloween 2018

Elizabeth Breznay is a unique and inspiring young woman. I don't remember when we first met, but I do remember how her eyes gleamed when we would have our daily exchanges. Eventually, she became a student in my Intro to Movie Appreciation Class. I always felt that she had so much to offer, but it was difficult for her to convey what she wanted to say. One day, I walked into the library and Lizzie was sitting at a table with her new computer, Tobii. This assistive technology allowed her to communicate and control her surroundings with her eyes. It was really the first time we had the communication barriers removed from our exchanges and it was thrilling. I love computers, but I couldn't believe what that computer could do and what it meant for her.

Lizzie was always interested in our in-house television station, The WAVE, and eventually she asked if she could do a weekly on-air segment. I was thrilled. She came to the WAVE room with her Tobii, and she was able to deliver the information flawlessly. It was amazing to watch. She really became part of our WAVE family, and the other members of the WAVE truly enjoyed working with her. I'm sure the students and teachers who were lucky enough to see her were astounded.

We were all sad to see Lizzie go, but very excited at her opportunity to begin college. I'm sure that as new developments in computing become available, Lizzie will master them. She has never let anything stand in her way of getting an education and being an inspiration. She is really one of life's unforgettable characters.

# A matter of "yes"

## Luzerne County Community College

By Ed Ackerman

Assistant Professor, Humanities



Collaboration in education, as it applies to each and every student, but especially as it applies to a special needs student such as Lizzie Breznay, hinges on one simple word: “yes.”

It is “yes” that starts the ball rolling and “yes” that keeps it rolling ... all the way to an ultimate goal.

In the case of Lizzie, a non-verbal person with Cerebral Palsy, that goal may appear to have been achieved by graduating Summa Cum Laude from Luzerne County Community College with a 4.0 average and being invited to “speak” (by way of sophisticated technology) at the commencement ceremony. But this is just another “yes” in her remarkable journey. There will be many ahead as she sets her sights on her next goal, and her next.

Those first words of “yes” were spoken by Lizzie’s parents, Helene and Brian Breznay, when from the very start they were undeterred by the obstacles their baby girl was sure to face, and determined to give her every opportunity to enjoy a full, rewarding life. “Yes” was the only word they knew. And the only word they wanted to hear.

Fortunately, they encountered the word “yes” at nearly every turn. And those who said “yes” to Lizzie’s dreams discovered a present coming their way in return. On the night of Lizzie’s glorious commencement celebration, her junior high music teacher, Brian Fischer, told a reporter from WNEP-TV Lizzie was “a gift.” In doing so, he echoed the sentiments of every teacher lucky enough to have known her.

I am one of those teachers. My first “yes” to Lizzie came when she and her aide and almost constant companion Robin appeared at the door of the computer classroom in which I was teaching. They wanted to know if they could use a computer in the back of the room to prepare for a class which followed mine. That “yes” led to some of the greatest joys in my 32-year teaching career, punctuated by every wink Lizzie gave me when I did something right. Her gift to me was a lesson in the depth and warmth of non-verbal communication.

Lizzie later enrolled in my Public Speaking class – which appropriately required another “yes” since the semester was already underway – and laid gifts at the feet of every classmate. They sat on the edge of their seats every time Lizzie wheeled herself to the front of the room to share her views, written by manipulating a keyboard with her eyes, and delivered via an electronic voice, while exhibiting an infectious enthusiasm for life. She was clearly the star of the class.

Lizzie heard the word “yes” all over the Luzerne County Community College campus as evidenced by her mother’s remarks, praising everyone from President Thomas Leary on down every time she’s been interviewed.

The young woman who held everyone at Mohegan Sun Arena in the palm of her hand during her commencement address, was an example of hard work and determination, to be sure, but also of an environment of collaboration and of a history of people willing to say “yes,” not the least of which was and is Lizzie herself.



**Tobii Eye Gaze Communicator**

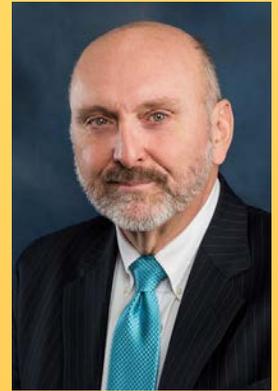


# EDUCATIONAL COLLABORATION IN THE AGE OF COVID:

## A Community College Perspective on Utilization of Technology in the Pandemic Era

By Thomas J. McHugh

Professor and Chairperson of the Communication Arts Department  
at Luzerne County Community College



Community Colleges offer a variety of programs from Automotive to Zoology. To provide students with knowledge and skill sets necessary to obtain an entry level position in a particular field, attention must be given to student's various learning styles. While some students are VISUAL learners, learning best through seeing and/or visualizing information, others are AUDITORY, learning through oral presentations or class discussions. Still others have better comprehension through READING/WRITING assignments, note taking and research papers.

When the Covid Pandemic hit and remote learning became mandated, it was an unfamiliar and uncomfortable means of instructional delivery for both student and faculty. Through existing course management systems like Blackboard, and emerging video conferencing services such as Zoom, delivering content was possible. But what of classroom interaction and collaboration between students? Also, careers like welding, culinary, plumbing, even dental hygiene and nursing rely heavily on hands-on (KINESTHETIC) instruction. With the adage of "practice makes perfect," these programs and others require many hours of practical experience for the students to hone their skills. Digital trainers or simulators may be available but what about access to these various modes of instruction?

The Communication Arts Department at Luzerne County Community College is a very lab intensive environment. Instructors work one-on-one with students to provide guidance as they work on creating content relating to Fine Arts, Digital Media, Photography, Music Recording and Audio/Video projects. The student's ability to express their artistic talent revolves around the availability of technology and software, as well as the opportunity to collaborate with each other to generate ideas and share creative energy. Both were challenged during the pandemic.

Catering to students of all ages and socio-economic backgrounds, the LCCC Open Door Admissions Policy also provides special needs and physically handicapped students with the opportunity to learn a vocation. Not everyone at the college has computer access to complete assignments and often the needed software is cost prohibitive. Through the Higher Education Emergency Relief Fund (HEERF) students in need were provided with laptop computers and wi-fi hot spots. And through special arrangements, all Adobe Creative Cloud software that the department utilizes was provided for home use, accessed through Luzerne computer servers.

The big hurdle was providing the opportunity for collaboration. Faculty took full advantage of the available technology to develop group projects, demonstrations, work group breakout sessions and other planned activities to develop higher level thinking competences, boost confidence and self-esteem, and improve social and interpersonal skills. The faculty also encouraged family members and care givers to take an active role. They assisted with technology needs, learning support and emotional assistance. It was a challenging time for all, but the collaboration between government, institution, faculty, and students and their families helped to ensure that the educational process kept on track and no instructional time was lost.



Reach for the stars!



# Work Based Learning Experiences

## Step By Step, Inc. Vocational Department

By Donna Jones

Community Employment Specialist



Step by Step, Inc's Vocational Department, in collaboration with the Office of Vocational Rehabilitation, has enjoyed supporting Lizzie Breznay and watching her progress through her work experiences. Lizzie and Step by Step have worked in various businesses during the past several years. While Lizzie was in high school, one of her first paid work experiences was with WVIA. Lizzie worked as a receptionist with the accommodation of a job coach to assist her in learning new tasks. Lizzie's outgoing personality and motivation to succeed make coaching her an enjoyable experience. Lizzie, with the support of Step by Step, also worked at the Back Mountain Library under the direction of the children's librarian. She utilized her Tobii device to read to the children and interact with them. She assisted with choosing the material to read and inputting it into her Tobii device. The children were curious about Lizzie's communication device and enjoyed the exposure to Lizzie and her unique way of reading stories.

Lizzie's current work experience is with the Wilkes Civic Engagement Office working with Megan Boone Valkenburg, Coordinator of Student Development and Donna Jones, Community Employment Specialist from Step by Step. Because of Lizzie's assistive technology skills, she is able to work remotely. Lizzie has worked on content for special events at Wilkes University for social media pages that are used to generate interest in campus upcoming events. Her current project is taking over writing the May newsletter normally produced by Megan.

I am confident that Lizzie will attain her goal of having a career in broadcasting. She is determined to succeed and make her mark on the industry. She has a positive attitude, a desire to advocate for others in need, and a "let's do this!" attitude.

## Lizzie's Message

My totally inclusive, quality educational experience has revolved around four C's: collaboration, critical thinking, creativity, and communication. I have cerebral palsy, and in my world, I have been very fortunate to reside in a genuinely supportive learning environment with a dedicated team of individuals to educate, encourage and influence me along my life journey. Those who have taken an active part in my education, including my parents, teachers, physical support team, family, and friends, have collaborated with me as well as each other to offer me the best opportunity for a quality education along with some really great memories.

Many people saw beyond my physical challenges, which inspired me to never give up on my dreams. My courage and commitment to "take over" this newsletter would not have been possible without the continued support of all the amazing people in my life. Each milestone of achievement means one more step closer to my goal of working in the broadcasting industry.

My internship at Wilkes University has incorporated the dedicated collaboration of Megan Boone Valkenburg of the Civic Engagement Office and Donna Jones of Step by Step to provide the guidance and accommodations necessary, which allows me to complete the requirements of my work assignments remotely. For this, I am genuinely grateful.



Donna Jones

Elizabeth "Lizzie" Breznay is an Intern with the Civic Engagement Office here at Wilkes University in collaboration with Step By Step. She graduated summa cum laude from Luzerne County Community College in May of 2021 with an associate degree in Audio/Video Communications. Lizzie is considered non-verbal and uses a Tobii Eye Gaze Communication Device to convey her thoughts. As an inspirational member of the community, Lizzie is an avid supporter and Honorary Board Member of "Dress for Success Luzerne County", is on the committee for the "Wilkes-Barre Special Needs Playground Project", is the Ambassador for the "Giving Special Kids Foundation", and enjoys supporting our veterans as well as various local fundraisers and community events throughout the area. Lizzie loves the excitement and spontaneity of being in front of the cameras during a live television broadcast, and plans to use her degree, talents, and experiences to pursue her dream of carving her own unique path in the broadcasting industry. Lizzie lives by the motto "never give up!" Her drive and determination are her inspiration to all who know her! In her spare time, Lizzie has fun exploring various crafting projects, computer gaming and social media.

I have been working with Step by Step, Inc. Vocational Services since 2007. I enjoy working with individuals with disabilities to help them achieve their employment goals. In my previous roles in the business community, I gained the knowledge to contribute to my current position. My job is fulfilling when I see the personal success of my clients. It is a mission dear to me because I also have a child who is now an adult with a disability. I have always been an advocate for individuals with special needs.



**Megan Valkenburg**  
**Civic Engagement Coordinator**

**If you could only sense how important you are to the lives of those you meet; how important you can be to the people you may never even dream of. There is something of yourself that you leave at every meeting with another person.**  
**- Mr. Rogers**

When I first met Lizzie, I, like all who know her, was drawn to her vibrant personality.

To me, Lizzie personifies "bloom where you're planted." In all she does, in every encounter with every person she meets, she blossoms. In turn, she encourages you to blossom too. I am richer for having Lizzie as part of my circle.

She reminds me of one of my favorite quotes by Mr. Rogers. We have no idea how the people we meet will impact us. Lizzie is one of those people who make your life richer by knowing her.

I knew her story needed to be shared. And what better way to talk about Collaborate to Educate than through those who know Lizzie the most. I don't think we were prepared for the OVERWHELMING response. So, Lizzie is taking over the next newsletter also, so she can enrich your life too!

**Are you a collaborative educator?  
Do you have a fun, unique learning  
method to share?**

**Reach us!**

megan.boone@wilkes.edu



**Follow us!**



**Keywords: Tobii Dynavox Eye Gaze Communication Device, Assistive Technology, Non-Verbal Communication, Special Needs Individual, Cerebral Palsy, Learning Styles, Inspiration, Collaboration, Education, Critical Thinking, Creativity, Communication, Perseverance, Tenacity, Courage, Encourage, Commitment, "Never Give Up", "The WAVE", Work Based Learning Experience, Internship, Step By Step, Inc., Luzerne Intermediate Unit, Office of Vocational Rehabilitation, Pride Mobility, Civic Engagement.**



**Please check out our next newsletter to follow my journey as I transition from college to the community and beyond in continuing the conversation of “Collaborate to Educate”.**

