

# Partnerships and Persistence

Public education helped Matt Ward become the first diagnosed autistic student to graduate from UW-Madison

**SESSION** *The First Autistic UW Madison Graduate — How Public Education Made His Success Story Possible* | **Presenters** Matt Ward, UW-Madison graduate; Nancy Alar, parent

**M**att Ward's successful graduation from UW-Madison in 2005 as its first autistic alumnus has a solid foundation in Wisconsin's public schools. But without the critical partnerships his mother Nancy Alar forged, along with her support, encouragement and persistence, Matt's future might have been dramatically different.

Ward is a math whiz. He took algebra and calculus in grade school. He creates complex origami using as many as 60 pieces of paper. In his freshman year of high school, he placed seventh in Wisconsin on a national math test. "I'm not sure how, but being autistic has made it really easy for me to learn math," he said.

"A lot of the kids in my classes thought I was stupid because I looked and acted kind of weird. I didn't know the social rules and sometimes did strange things or made strange noises," Ward explained.

Alar's impassioned pleas for her son started at 18 months, when a private, religious day care notified Matt's parents that he would have to withdraw from the program due to his "oddities."

In retrospect, Alar said being removed from the private program was Matt's "salvation." When he started in the Monona Grove School

District, "Graduating from the UW was the furthest thing from our minds," she said.

"Everything Monona Grove did for Matt was customized," she said. "I formed a partnership with the special education director and provided training for his staff, so we could all learn together on how to do this autism thing. That proved very beneficial."

Alar kept meticulous academic and behavioral records each year and passed the chronicles of Matt's education onto his new teachers annually. "The fact that the staff we worked with had information about Matt all along, meant they were always reassuring and would say, 'No, everything is going to be OK.' That the public schools were willing to do that for us as a family was wonderful. When I was at my lowest point, they would sometimes rescue me."

Bullying was one issue that Ward faced in high school. "I think I was a target because I was so different and didn't have any friends," he said. "I even think some of the bullies would follow me around — like stalked me — to see if they could get me in trouble," he said.

Alar added, "It's so important to suppress bullying — to have other people understand how awful it feels to be bullied."



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— Nancy Alar,  
Matt Ward's mother

Ward's life took an important turn with the high score on the national math test. He joined the school math team, took Advanced Placement math classes, experienced success and was embraced by his teammates who overlooked his "oddities." By the end of high school he had gained independence, which led to part-time jobs.

He continued to have a support team (mom, disability coordinator, county case manager, paid aide and others) at Madison College and UW-Madison.

Today, Ward works at the Madison Central Public Library and has an art studio where he creates origami.

"Being autistic is part of who I am," he said. "Sometimes I have problems, but I am satisfied with my life. I enjoy my jobs and hobbies and am proud of my accomplishments. I really like living in my own apartment. Being able to read speeches like this makes me feel like I finally have a voice of my own." ■