



LOCAL

'He's just an amazing person': Barber National Institute student O'Mari Dance wins international award

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O'Mari Dance's journey as a student at the Barber National Institute has been anything but easy.

At 3 years old, Dance came to the Barber National Institute in Erie, which provides services for children and adults with intellectual disabilities. He was enrolled in the Elizabeth Lee Black School within the Institute.

"When O'Mari came he was very little and he didn't have the emotional skills you need to be able to function in a normal school with a lot of children," said his teacher of four years, Samantha Wheeler. "He needed a lot of individualized attention."

Dance faced numerous behavioral challenges. From physically acting out when he would get upset, to refusing to do chores, the Erie resident constantly needed supervision to make sure he was following his education plan.

But now, at 21 and only months from graduating, Dance is far more independent.

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"He's just an amazing person compared to who he was four years ago," Wheeler said. "He's developed all those skills that he needs to function in the world, he could live by himself with minimal supports and his responsibilities have just increased so much."

To recognize Dance's progression, Wheeler nominated her student for a 2022 "Yes I Can! Award" from the Council for Exceptional Children, the largest international professional

organization dedicated to improving the success of children and youth with disabilities and/or gifts and talents.

Out of nearly 100 nominees throughout the U.S. and Canada, Dance was one of 12 who won the award.

Dance was awarded in the area of "Transition," recognizing his development academically, socially and emotionally as he grew into a young adult.

Lending a helping hand

On Feb. 16, Dance tackled his daily list of responsibilities, which started with collecting leftover breakfast items from classrooms and returning them to the cafeteria's coolers.

Once finished, he returned to Wheeler's classroom, where she gave a Black History Month lesson on Black doctors and their contributions to the medical field. Lessons change daily, but Dance enjoys "News to You," a segment of the day where students learn about current events, and watching weather forecasts the most.

"I want to know (about the weather) because I don't like a lot of snow," Dance said. "But I always shovel for my dad because he doesn't want to step on any snow."

Every day around noon, Dance visits the school fish tank, where he feeds the fish and cleans their tank.

For the past few years, it's been his proudest job.

"The school was trying to find something that he would be interested in to increase his responsibility," Wheeler said. "Every day he would pick a different fish and look up information on them."

Through his research, Dance compiled a small book that hangs next to the tank with facts about each fish.

To prepare for his graduation in June, Dance has been teaching another student his fish tank responsibilities, ensuring they will be looked after when he's gone.

After checking the fish, Dance began his afternoon job of lunch prep.

Before the coronavirus pandemic, ELBS students would gather in the cafeteria for meals, but since 2020, they started eating breakfast and lunch in their classrooms.

The new eating arrangements led to the creation of Dance's job.

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"With all of the added things that the lunch staff needed to do ... they needed somebody to help," Wheeler said. "Since O'Mari is one of the oldest kids in the building, they gave him a shot."

From the cafeteria, Dance wheeled a cart around to each classroom and picked up bins full of dirty lunch trays.

Along his route, he waved to teachers and students who have come to recognize his familiar face. Once he collected each bin and returned them to the cafeteria, he went around again to collect water pitchers that needed to be refilled.

"Those are inside the classrooms, so he has to knock on the door to ask for them," Wheeler said. "It took us a long time to teach him that you don't just knock on the door and run in. It took three-step directives to allow him to learn, but he does great now."

Dance really "does anything we ask him to do," Wheeler said.

What's next for Dance

His responsibilities don't stop at the classroom.

At home, Dance takes care of his family's dog and also learned how to cook simple meals for himself. Noodles are his favorite.

He'll also occasionally babysit his little sister, but doesn't cook for her.

"I only give her snacks, it's all she wants," he said. "And juice."

After he graduates, Dance is looking forward to relaxing, but also working with his dad, who handles home repairs.

Dance's transition into living independently has been years in the making, and Wheeler is confident he'll succeed after leaving the ELBS.

"O'Mari had five jobs he would do every day when I first got him and he hated them so much," she said. "We thought, 'Is he ever going to be able to get a job?' But now, he's so thorough and he does so much by himself."

When asked about winning the "Yes I Can! Award" Dance offered one word to describe how it made him feel.

"Happy," he said.

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