

challenging CHANGE

Student with a visual impairment
defines resilience in a pandemic year

Change: uncomfortable and sudden. Universally understood in a year unprecedented by it. Socially distanced and masked; 2020 has been anything but normal.

Last March, students and teachers became isolated from one another. For **Dylan Fisher**, 11, this change did not come lightly.

Fisher's visual impairment and diagnosed autism requires school to be a fully personal and interactive learning environment. Being apart from his exceptional education teacher, **Michelle Thompson**, due to quarantine made learning an extreme obstacle.

"You have to understand that with Dylan's technology, not everything works like it works for you as an online student," Thompson said. "There's a lot of obstacles with [technology] that we have had to overcome. His computer has to read [information] to him because he can't see it, so some programs or things that teachers put up are not compatible for his voiceover."

As school became a new virtual world to navigate, Fisher's life beyond school was confined to the boundaries of his home. So used to socializing with peers and teachers, Fisher was struck with a new reality. A quiet one. As families became home-bound Dylan's dad, **Andy Fisher**, saw a shift take hold in Dylan.

"He wouldn't be as communicative; he didn't have so much to talk about when he didn't go to school so he became more introverted," Andy Fisher said. "His frustration would be at a higher level because he had none of the supports that he was used to. He has a vision itinerant who comes and sees him for various aids as well as his 101, Mrs. Thompson. But all that socialization and all the support was taken away, so it was largely put on him and us."

Returning back to school in-person in the fall of 2020 was a reassuring sign of normalcy, with a few safety exceptions.

"With the whole CO"VID situation I think [a lot] has changed. It kind of feels weird to be wearing a mask and I have a hard time hearing what people are saying because of them," Dylan said. "It's pretty difficult because I'm very used to working in groups and being able to do stuff like the [Exceptional] Warriors Club."

Adjusting and adapting is something Dylan has championed not only in this year, but throughout his entire life. Losing his sight in kindergarten, Dylan has learned how to accommodate a visual impairment, something that has not come easy.

"Losing my sight prevented me from doing certain things," Dylan said. "I can't drive, I can't read print; I can only read print with big font and I can read Braille. I also [can't] do certain chores around the house."

Moving up into high school, Dylan was faced with a new challenge: he would be receiving a new specialist teacher, someone he had never worked with before. After 17 years working at Wando, Thompson was sought out by an assistant principal and was offered a job position that would lead to a close friendship and new understanding.

"I had never worked with someone that was visually impaired before. Dylan also has autism and I have had experience with that, but not with visual impairments," Thompson said. "I was very nervous when I first started working with him because I had to learn a lot of the things myself, so Dylan actually taught me about a lot of things that are needed to be when you are visually impaired."

Over the next three years, Thompson and Dylan learned how to work with one another. Currently, their work is focused on everyday living skills and independence. From learning how to cook simple meals on the stove to setting up internships opportunities, they practice for what is to come in

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life.

"Instead of looking at just getting a good grade in school, we are looking at the future," Thompson said. "He has become so much more independent in the last three years, part of that is because he's maturing age wise, but part of it is I push him out of his comfort zone a little bit and he adjusts."

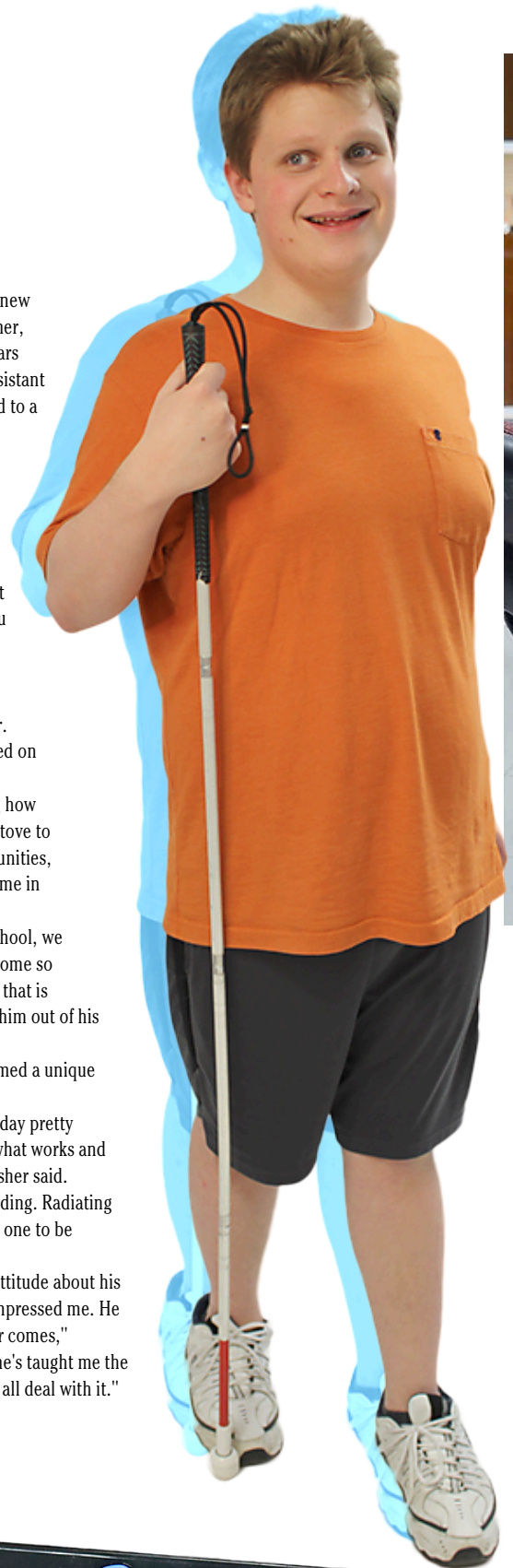
Working hours on end together, the pair quickly formed a unique bond.

"We are with each other a lot, I mean seven hours a day pretty much. You get to know each other and you figure out what works and what doesn't work, just like any other relationship," Fisher said.

In a year defeated by COVID-19, Fisher remains standing. Radiating genuine kindness, Fisher's optimistic outlook on life is one to be admired.

"I have to say one of the biggest impacts is Dylan's attitude about his disabilities; he's just a happy kid and that has always impressed me. He doesn't let it get him down; he just deals with whatever comes," Thompson said. "So that would probably be the thing he's taught me the most: if he can deal with whatever comes, then we can all deal with it."

Story by Allie Frizzell
Designer Clara Barresi



behind the FOCUS 40

A look at Fisher's Braille keyboard
and communication device

"He writes **non-stop** in his free time. He has multiple stories, it's not all the same thing." - **Michelle Thompson**, faculty

"The most **important** thing is I can read what I type. The voice over can also read what I type."

"It's connected to my i-pad through **Bluetooth**. It acts like a regular key board."

"I use these rocker keys to control my voice over."

Dylan Fisher, 11

