

A University of Memphis program founded in 2013 to assist its intellectually and developmentally disabled enrollees continues its mission a decade later.

Through TigerLIFE (Learning Independence Fostering Education and Employment), students receive a postsecondary education, gain employment and live independently in their communities.

Students in the program are from 18 to 29 years old.

### Cerebral palsy clinic aids by 'bringing everybody together'

“Students make an application, pay the \$25 application fee, we read through their applications, and we invite in the people that look like they’re good candidates for the program.” said Chrisann Schiro-Geist, TigerLIFE’s director.

Multiple staff members interview the interested students.

The 60-hour, four-semester program operates under the college’s Institute on Disability; students earn a completion award in career and community studies after finishing the curriculum.

Students earn between 240 and 300 hours of work experience, as well as potential employment from their internship site.

Marshalls on Poplar Avenue in Germantown partnered with TigerLIFE from 2015 to 2020 with an internship that ran Tuesdays and Thursdays. To be chosen for the opportunity, program members had to be selected by the company following their interview process.

While the internship between Marshalls and TigerLIFE ceased due to COVID-19, TigerLIFE students won’t be left in the dark.

“As long as they’re ready for an interview and they reach out to us, we still take them.” Sarah Rawahneh, Marshall's store manager said.

So far, the store has employed four TigerLIFE students.

Other employers that have developed internships with TigerLIFE include Nike, Chartwell Foods at the U of M, FedEx, Sephora, ServiceMaster and Home Depot.

“Our students have the chance to work for anybody in the city that they want to work for,” Schiro-Geist said.

These employers provide a variety of work for the program’s students ranging from retail to food service.

“We have a commitment to giving them a competitive job at the end of the program,” Schiro-Geist said. “Currently, about 70% of our graduates have a real job (Competitive Integrated Employment) within a year of graduating.”

CIE is defined as full-time or part-time work that features an integrated workspace, equal benefits, compensation at or above minimum wage and the opportunity of advancement for all disabled employees.

Teacher honors daughter’s disability with book ‘I Am Different’



**Kim Bearden and her son Knight take a selfie during his TigerLIFE graduation in May 2023.** (Courtesy Kim Bearden)

Eleven students are projected to graduate in May 2024 from TigerLIFE, and more than 300 students have graduated from the program.

Without the program, Schiro-Geist says she feels it would limit the opportunities of these students to be proactive in their post high school years.

“The alternative is ‘don't go to work, don't do anything,’ because some people with intellectual disabilities just stay home,” Schiro-Geist said.

According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Community Living, the nonprofit SRVS (pronounced servers) ran the lone sheltered workshop in Shelby County from 1962 to 2012.

Nationally, sheltered workshops were designed to employ people with disabilities but did so separately from other non-disabled people.

It also excluded them from basic labor standards such as minimum wage requirements.

The Tennessee Department of Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities pushed SRVS to commit to applying for technical assistance funded through the U.S. Department of Labor, Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP), and Employment First State Leadership Mentoring Program (EFSLMP).

This led to assisting 20 beneficiaries into integrated employment during fall 2012. This work helped initiate the inevitable closing of the workshop in summer 2015.

Southaven native Kim Bearden learned about TigerLIFE with her son, Knight Caldwell, during his senior year of high school.

Caldwell, who has autism, graduated from TigerLIFE in May 2023.

“When he was being advised in the period leading up to his (high school) graduation, his counselors and I discussed options, and they were well-versed in the TigerLIFE program,” Bearden said. “They recommended that we check it out, and we did.”

Bearden was appreciative of the program’s location.

“There are programs like this around the South, but they're a couple hours away in one direction or another,” Bearden said. “So to have this resource in Memphis is huge for the families and people who live with autism or people with autism.”

Southwest Tennessee CC receives grant for students with disabilities, autism

Thanks to the TigerLIFE and a post-college relationship with nonprofit The Arc of Mississippi, Caldwell now has a full-time job at the Sephora warehouse in Olive Branch.

“We were told about the possibility of working there, and it just worked out,” Bearden said.

While Bearden and Caldwell would’ve sought additional post-high school training elsewhere, there’s no doubt from Bearden that nothing could replace what TigerLIFE provided for her son.

“Knowing what I know now, nothing else would have done as much or prepared him for the working world as thoroughly as the TigerLIFE program,” Bearden said.

Caldwell’s evolution throughout the process was an eye-opening experience for Bearden and her parenting style, she said.

“I watched him mature and do things that I never thought he’d consider doing,” Bearden said. “As a parent, I was pushed out of my comfort zone and letting go to allow the process to happen.

“It was a fulfilling two-year program, and I’m so glad that it exists.”



**Matthew Bell poses in front a Memphis Tiger statue.** (Kambui Bomani/The Daily Memphian)

For Collierville native Matthew Bell, a flyer at Collierville High is how he learned about the program.

“I wanted to be a Tiger and go to Memphis with my friends and be home with my family,” Bell said in an email to The Daily Memphian. “After I went to orientation ... and saw some of my friends from Collierville, I knew I was home.”

Bell has autism. He compared the program, which he graduated from in May 2023, to paradise.

“At first, I was excited and nervous, and then I got used to it,” Bell said. “Then I got an ‘A’ ranking, so I could travel the campus alone and with other students.”

Throughout the program, students are evaluated on their behavior and intellectual ability as they navigate through the campus, Schiro-Geist said. People who receive an 'A' rating can move around campus without program supervision.

Matthew Bell works at Lost Pizza in Collierville, a job that he's held for more than a year.

His father Jeff Bell said the program led to Matthew's hiring, due to it teaching him how to complete a resume and interview skills.

"I helped start an internship at Collierville High School with friends I went to school with, and one of my friends works with me now at Lost Pizza," Matthew Bell said.