



ELEMENTARY SCHOOL SUSPENSIONS

Following our monthslong investigation, there is call for change.

See how we're
making an impact.

Learn More

courier journal
PART OF THE USA TODAY NETWORK

'We're capable of so much': Grad with autism is first to earn WKU special education degree

Mandy McLaren, Louisville Courier Journal Published 8:41 a.m. ET May 15, 2019

Clay Harville always knew he was different.

He knew he had a hard time telling what others were feeling and that he would sometimes fiddle his hands or grind his nails. He knew that he went to school with other kids who were different, too.

But it wasn't until he started high school — when he decided to broach the subject with his parents — that he could name the difference:

Autism.

He was 14.

"I had trouble accepting it, to the point where I was really upset with myself," Harville said. "I started looking back on moments and thought, 'Is this why people lose their patience with me?'"

But his parents were there for him. He saw a counselor. He found his groove at the new school. And he realized, he said, that what at first he thought was a weakness, was instead his greatest strength — a lesson he now hopes to teach other kids with autism.

On Saturday, Harville, now 23, became the first to graduate from [Western Kentucky University's Kelly Autism Program](https://www.wku.edu/kellyautismprogram/) (<https://www.wku.edu/kellyautismprogram/>) with a degree in elementary and special education.

"Just because I have this," he said, "it doesn't mean it's going to stop me from doing what I want to do. In fact, it can help make it better."

'We struggled with it'

Harville was first diagnosed with autism at age 4.

"We struggled with it at first," said his dad, Brad Harville. "We didn't like the idea of hanging that diagnosis on him."

In the years to come, Harville would also be diagnosed with obsessive compulsive disorder and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder.

Born and raised in Louisville, he attended Summit Academy, a private school in Middletown for kids with learning differences, until the eighth grade.

"We always had the expectation he was going to grow up and have the same experiences as everyone else," his father said. "He was going to get a driver's license. He was going to graduate from high school."

You may like: [Welcome to the Home for Wayward Babydolls, a creepy resting place for discarded toys \(/story/entertainment/arts/2019/05/14/eastern-kentucky-home-wayward-babydolls-baby-dolls-creepy-resting-place-discarded-toys/1129074001/\)](#)

Buy Photo 



Louisville native Clay Harville, left, walks with fellow graduates during the Topper Walk at Western Kentucky University. Harville is the first to graduate from WKU's autism program with a degree in special education teaching. (Photo: Alton Strupp/Courier Journal)

At Summit, it had been easy for Harville to make friends.

But that changed when he started at Trinity High School, a Catholic all-boys, college preparatory school. It was his first time being surrounded by “neurotypical” kids, Harville said.

He tried to fit in with the other boys, dancing, rapping and telling vulgar jokes.

“I thought, ‘Well, this is inappropriate,’” he recalled. “But to these guys, it’s not. So I guess this is the way I’m going to make friends.”

There were times he struggled reading social cues or couldn't understand why he had upset an adult.

But he became the manager for the school's basketball team and steadily improved his grades. By senior year, he had a 4.0 GPA, he said.

“I wanted to make my mark,” Harville said.

Some of his Summit friends had enrolled at Trinity, too. But not everyone was having success there, he said.

“The one thing that stood out to me the most, that was sort of a heart-breaker, was seeing not many of my friends do well at Trinity, academically and most of all socially,” he said. “They were either bullied or they were just neglected by teachers.”

Some of those friends didn't make it to graduation, he said.

“I wish I could have been there for him, for her.”

'Did this just happen?'

When he moved into a Bowling Green dorm in the fall of 2014, Harville didn't yet know what he wanted to study.

He was too focused on whether he could make it on his own.

“I’ve had a routine all my life,” he said. “Kids with autism love routines. They don’t like change.”

The transition to college weighed on his parents, too. His mom left move-in day in tears. His dad was unable to make eye contact, Harville said.

“As soon as my parents walked out the door, I just sat in my room, staring at the ceiling, saying, ‘Did this just happen? Did I just seriously leave home? Did I just seriously step into a whole new routine?’”

Support local journalism

Support stories like this one by becoming a subscriber today! [Get unlimited digital access here!](https://offers.courier-journal.com/digitaloffer&gps-source=CPNEWS&utm_medium=mix&utm_source=news&utm_campaign=NEWSROOM&utm_content=CPNEWSD) (https://offers.courier-journal.com/digitaloffer&gps-source=CPNEWS&utm_medium=mix&utm_source=news&utm_campaign=NEWSROOM&utm_content=CPNEWSD)

(https://offers.courier-journal.com/digitaloffer&gps-source=CPNEWS&utm_medium=mix&utm_source=news&utm_campaign=NEWSROOM&utm_content=CPNEWSD)

(https://offers.courier-journal.com/digitaloffer&gps-source=CPNEWS&utm_medium=mix&utm_source=news&utm_campaign=NEWSROOM&utm_content=CPNEWSD)

Harville chose Western, in part, for its [nationally renowned](https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/20/health/autism-spectrum-college.html?_r=1) (https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/20/health/autism-spectrum-college.html?_r=1) Kelly Autism Program, which provides support to students with autism spectrum disorder. The program, founded in 2005, served 60 students this academic year.

In those first few days on campus in 2014, program staff helped Harville and his peers acclimate to their new lives.

Most importantly, Harville said, students were given their own rooms.

"It gives them some time at night to be alone, to regroup, and, for lack of better words, to recharge that social bank account," said program director Michelle Elkin. "And be ready for the next day."

Harville made friends through social events scheduled by program staff and attended 12 hours per week of mandatory study time.

"He's a very bright young man and could absolutely handle the material," Elkin said. "But he just needed someone to have that hand on his back and make sure he wasn't falling behind."

Buy Photo 



Louisville native Clay Harville, left, gets a hug from his mother, Mary Harville, before the start of the Topper Walk at Western Kentucky University. Harville is the first to graduate from WKU's autism program with a degree in special education teaching. May 11, 2019 (Photo: Alton Strupp/Courier Journal)

In class, Harville discovered a love for writing. He dabbled in psychology and geography, but by the end of his freshman year was still unsure of what major he wanted to pursue.

When his parents suggested he consider a degree in teaching, Harville balked.

"I thought to myself, 'A teacher? That's ridiculous,'" he said, recalling his friends' high school struggles. "You see the way teachers interact with kids? No way."

'Not asking for you to spoon feed me'

But the more Harville thought about it, the more a career in teaching began to make sense.

He knew he was good with kids.

And he knew how it felt to be misunderstood — especially in the classroom.

"Maybe being a teacher can help me understand more about this," he recalled thinking.

Harville began coursework for a degree in elementary and special education, eventually observing and student-teaching in classrooms across the Bowling Green area.

Western's autism program ensured Harville received appropriate accommodations in class, such as extra time to complete tests. But there were occasions, he said, when he felt overwhelmed and under-supported.

DIG DEEPER

You may also be interested in



- [Woodland Garden for the ages: A sneak peek at Parklands of Floyds Fork's new attraction \(https://www.courier-journal.com/story/news/2019/05/10/new-woodland-garden-opens-parklands-floyds-fork/3195629002/?utm_source=oembed&utm_medium=onsite&utm_campaign=storylines&utm_content=news&utm_term=3132883002\)](https://www.courier-journal.com/story/news/2019/05/10/new-woodland-garden-opens-parklands-floyds-fork/3195629002/?utm_source=oembed&utm_medium=onsite&utm_campaign=storylines&utm_content=news&utm_term=3132883002)
- [Kentuckians were promised internet. What they got: \\$1.5B information highway to nowhere \(https://www.courier-journal.com/story/news/investigations/2019/05/08/kentucky-wired-internet-project/3238594002/?utm_source=oembed&utm_medium=onsite&utm_campaign=storylines&utm_content=news&utm_term=3132883002\)](https://www.courier-journal.com/story/news/investigations/2019/05/08/kentucky-wired-internet-project/3238594002/?utm_source=oembed&utm_medium=onsite&utm_campaign=storylines&utm_content=news&utm_term=3132883002)
- [Downtown Louisville welcomes market that sells affordable, fresh food \(https://www.courier-journal.com/story/money/louisville-city-living/2019/05/13/louisville-food-superior-market-and-deli-bodega-grocery-opens-downtown/1151335001/?utm_source=oembed&utm_medium=onsite&utm_campaign=storylines&utm_content=news&utm_term=3132883002\)](https://www.courier-journal.com/story/money/louisville-city-living/2019/05/13/louisville-food-superior-market-and-deli-bodega-grocery-opens-downtown/1151335001/?utm_source=oembed&utm_medium=onsite&utm_campaign=storylines&utm_content=news&utm_term=3132883002)
- [Kentucky's hunger initiative earns national attention. But thousands still need food \(https://www.courier-journal.com/story/news/local/2019/05/13/kentucky-hunger-initiative-helps-improve-food-insecurity/3245166002/?utm_source=oembed&utm_medium=onsite&utm_campaign=storylines&utm_content=news&utm_term=3132883002\)](https://www.courier-journal.com/story/news/local/2019/05/13/kentucky-hunger-initiative-helps-improve-food-insecurity/3245166002/?utm_source=oembed&utm_medium=onsite&utm_campaign=storylines&utm_content=news&utm_term=3132883002)
- [Pilot accused of 2015 triple murder in Western Kentucky arrested at Louisville airport \(https://www.courier-journal.com/story/news/crime/2019/05/11/christian-county-kentucky-2015-triple-murder-suspect-arrested-louisville-airport/1175736001/?utm_source=oembed&utm_medium=onsite&utm_campaign=storylines&utm_content=news&utm_term=3132883002\)](https://www.courier-journal.com/story/news/crime/2019/05/11/christian-county-kentucky-2015-triple-murder-suspect-arrested-louisville-airport/1175736001/?utm_source=oembed&utm_medium=onsite&utm_campaign=storylines&utm_content=news&utm_term=3132883002)

Though his professors were skilled at training teachers to work with kids with special needs, they weren't necessarily prepared to be teaching students with learning differences themselves, Harville said.

"The content was so complicated to a point that I just didn't want to do it," he said, adding that he wished he had more one-on-one support. "Which I know would look a little weird because you don't see college students doing that. But why not?"

Harville admitted that, like many college students, he wasn't always the most disciplined.

But he didn't understand, he said, why it felt like some professors were resistant to lending him extra support.

"Yeah, I have these difficulties. But that's what I need help with," he recalled thinking. "I'm not asking for you to spoon feed me."

'You have to be patient'

Harville's struggles carried over into his student teaching experiences.

Breaking down learning standards, defining objectives, plotting out lessons — he was in over his head.

And the nerves he faced whenever he tried something new ("Who's going to lose their patience with me first?") kept creeping up.

"I have that anxiety," he said. "Because it happens to me all the time."

One teacher didn't like that he walked about the classroom while she delivered instruction. He thought he was being helpful, checking on students. She thought it was weird, he said.

One time, in another classroom, he froze in the middle of leading a lesson.

"I was panicking on the inside," he said. "I could feel sweat dripping."

But there were good days, too.



Louisville native Clay Harville, adjust his graduation tassel before the Topper Walk at Western Kentucky University. May 11, 2019 (Photo: Alton Strupp/Courier Journal)

He dressed the part to teach a class of fourth-graders about the Hatfield–McCoy feud. His adviser from Western's autism program helped him stay on top of his lesson planning. And one day, after opening up to a group of middle school special education students about his autism diagnosis, one boy said he wished Harville would always be his teacher.

"I never expected that," Harville said. "It made me feel like this is exactly what kids need."

More news: [Kentucky to invalidate some students' test scores as JCPS staff broke rules, report finds \(/story/news/education/2019/05/13/jcps-louisville-public-schools-staff-broke-testing-rules-kentucky-officials-find/1155212001/\)](https://www.courier-journal.com/story/news/education/2019/05/13/jcps-louisville-public-schools-staff-broke-testing-rules-kentucky-officials-find/1155212001/)

When he saw one teacher penalize first-graders for not responding quickly with a correct answer, Harville was even more motivated to lead his own classroom.

"Don't assume they don't care," he said. "You have to be patient to a student who may not always get things ... Maybe they do want to learn it, but they just can't process it right away."

Harville, who has an auditory processing disorder, could relate.

"Just as a person with dyslexia has difficulty reading and understanding the printed page, Clay's issue is understanding the spoken word," his dad said. "They just don't register with him as easily."

'He knows what it's like'

Brad Harville and his wife, Mary, are still letting their son's college graduation sink in.

Degree in hand, Harville is moving back in with them to save money while he looks for a job as a teacher's assistant. There are a few more tests he will need to pass before he becomes fully certified to teach on his own.

Harville's ultimate goal, he said, is landing a job at Summit Academy, where he first realized he was different. No matter where he teaches, he'll be able

to "relate to those kids," his dad said.

"Particularly the ones that have learning differences, because he knows what it's like," Brad Harville said. "He's been there."

Harville said he will spend the summer hanging out with friends and maybe getting a job at a local grocery store. He plans to start a blog and one day wants to write a book about his experiences.

He is autistic.

He is proud.

And he wants others with autism to be proud, too.

"We're capable of so much," he said. "You just don't realize it yet."

'This is a right': JCPS broke Kentucky breastfeeding law, lawsuit from mom argues ([/story/news/education/2019/05/09/jcps-broke-kentucky-breastfeeding-law-lawsuit-mom-argues/1150472001/](https://www.courier-journal.com/story/news/education/2019/05/09/jcps-broke-kentucky-breastfeeding-law-lawsuit-mom-argues/1150472001/))

What is autism?

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a developmental disability that can cause significant social, communication and behavioral challenges, [according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/autism/facts.html). (<https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/autism/facts.html>)

People with ASD may communicate, interact and learn in ways that are different from most other people. Signs of ASD begin during early childhood and typically last throughout a person's life. Some people with ASD need a lot of help in their daily lives; others need less, according to the CDC.

ASD can occur in all racial, ethnic and socioeconomic groups.

About one in 59 children have been identified with ASD, according to CDC estimates. Boys were four times more likely to be identified than girls.

Children or adults with ASD might:

- not look at objects when another person points at them;
- avoid eye contact and want to be alone;
- have trouble understanding other people's feelings or talking about their own feelings;
- appear to be unaware when people talk to them, but respond to other sounds;
- repeat actions over and over again;
- have trouble adapting when a routine changes;
- have unusual reactions to the way things smell, taste, look, feel or sound.

Mandy McLaren: 502-582-4525; mmclaren@courier-journal.com (<mailto:mmclaren@courier-journal.com>); Twitter: [@mandy_mclaren](https://www.twitter.com/mandy_mclaren) (https://www.twitter.com/mandy_mclaren). Support strong local journalism by subscribing today: [courier-journal.com/mandym](https://www.courier-journal.com/mandym) (<https://www.courier-journal.com/mandym>).



Mary Harville, from left, stands with her son, Clay Harville, and husband Brad Harville for a portrait before the start of the Topper Walk at Western Kentucky University. Harville is the first to graduate from WKU's autism program with a degree in special education teaching. May 11, 2019 (Photo: Alton Strupp/Courier Journal)

Read or Share this story: <https://www.courier-journal.com/story/news/education/2019/05/15/louisville-kentucky-student-clay-harville-first-to-graduate-from-wku-autism-program/1188837001/>

LAW AND DISORDER

Our investigations uncover the stories that give people the power to change lives.