

## A Theological Perspective BY KYLE JONAS

Yesterday afternoon I was sitting in my professor's office discussing an upcoming project in the Divinity School. "But is it a theological conversation?" I asked, worried I may be off topic. "Of course it is!" he responded. "Theology deals with what it means to be deeply human." He's right, and my involvement with Next Steps and the Kennedy Center have been invaluable in shaping my theological worldview.

When I arrived at Vanderbilt last August, I was worried about how the next two years would look financially. I needed a job. I took up two Work-Study positions, one working in communications at the Kennedy Center and another as a job coach with Next Steps.

As a job coach, I walked with students as they navigated new work environments, watching them rediscover what it meant to be confident and believe in themselves over and over again. Tammy Day, Next Steps director, was eager to capture the voices of our students on film. We got a camera, started filming, and then I got out of the way. The students loved being involved in the movie project. After watching it all come together over several months, it dawned on me that I was a part of something special. I was documenting incredible stories of hope.

My positions within these two organizations have changed dramatically over the past year. I'm a job coach, teacher, videographer, and job developer. The Kennedy Center has allowed me to continue making videos where I get to tell some great stories with a camera. The best part is that working with Next Steps has given me the chance to actually be a part of these stories.

The most valuable takeaway for me has been watching how faculty and staff at both Next Steps and the VKC approach and relate to people with disabilities in intentional ways. From individualized Person-Centered-Planning meetings to a simple conversation in the hall, these organizations hinge on connecting with individuals on a deeply personal level. I think this interaction should



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Kyle Jonas (center) with Next Steps at Vanderbilt graduates Matthew Moore (L) and Will McMillan (R)

be a model for how we encounter people in general. This is deeply theological to me because it resists a formula to human interaction. It requires me to listen before speaking.

I'm not sure what kind of job I'll get when I graduate. Teaching? Filming? Writing? Wherever I end up, I'm grateful to have a concrete example of what it looks like when an organization is person-centered rather than profit-centered. ■

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