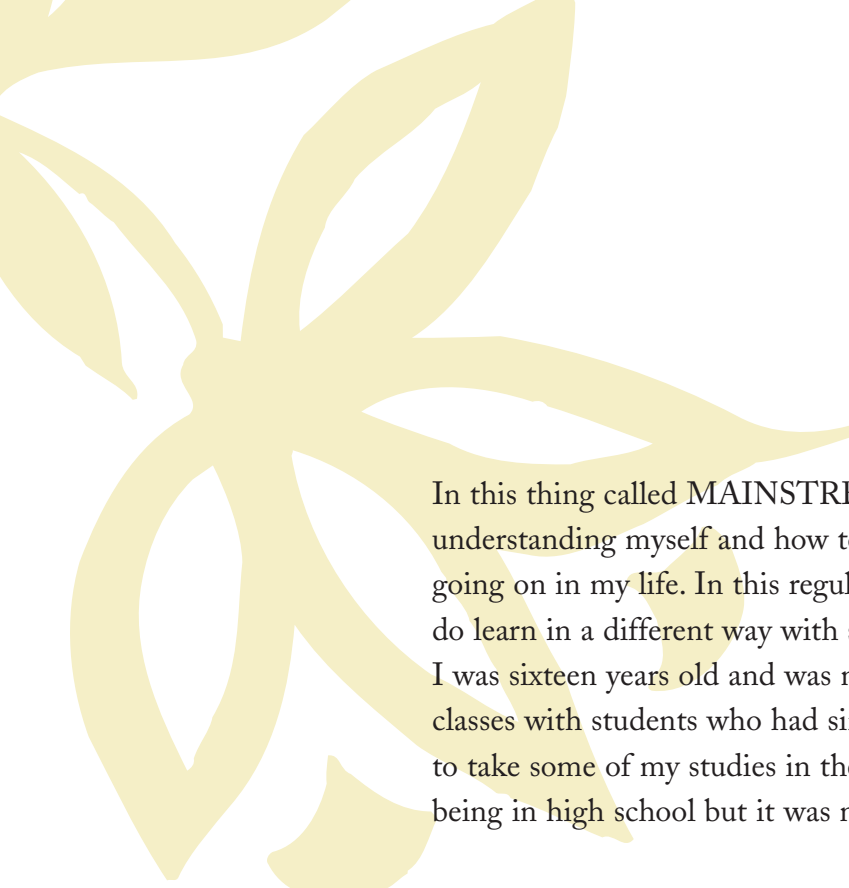


# A Mainstreamed Lifestyle

**M**Y LIFE IS DIFFICULT BUT MANAGEABLE BY MY DETERMINATION to be a part of society. As a child in elementary school it was very difficult for me to comprehend some of my classroom work. English and history were my best subjects and I was always able to make A(s) and B(s) in those two subjects. By the time I got to Middle School, I knew something was very wrong in my world. It was very hard for me to understand how to do a lot of things in my day-to-day activities and I had a very hard time doing math. When I was twelve years old I was tested and it was discovered that I had a learning disability. It was identified that my greatest problems were in math and processing information. The first thing that I had to learn and except was that by being labeled with this title did not mean that I was stupid but simply that I had a problem in learning. I had to learn in a special way that was easy for me to understand. A way that I could put stuff together and know what I was talking about. I had to develop my own ways to understand me and how to solve problems. Many of my classmates did not include me into their circle of friends and often made me feel like I was an outcast. It was hard for me to make friends. My friends were my family and their friends.

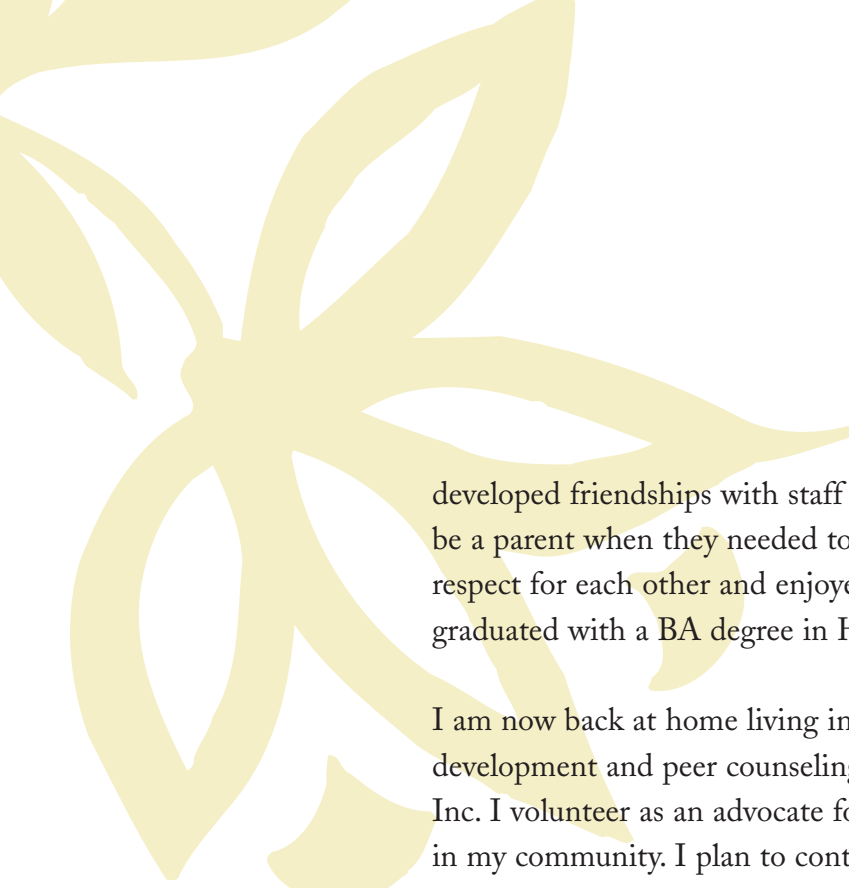
With the school system identifying the problem I was enrolled in a special education program. This was not the best situation for me to learn. This special education program had students with learning disabilities and also emotionally disturbed in the same class. This mix just did not work well. It was very hard to maintain my thoughts with all of the classroom problems and noise. Most of the teachers could not control their classrooms. Students were always in the hallways making noise and doing all kinds of things to others. Many of us were so frustrated that they kept stuff going that it made it hard for everybody else who wanted to learn. Two years of this mess and I finally was MAINSTREAMED. I believe this is when I began to win the fight. I knew I was going to do something with my life.



In this thing called MAINSTREAMED I was now able to begin to work on better understanding myself and how to solve some of the problematic things that were going on in my life. In this regular school setting, I had a curriculum that enabled me to learn in a different way with supports that I needed for me to understand. By now I was sixteen years old and was now developing friendships. I took the difficult classes with students who had similar needs for support like me and I was also able to take some of my studies in the normal setting. Of course, it was still kind of wild being in high school but it was manageable for me.

In June, 1995 at the age of eighteen I graduated from high school with a diploma. Somewhere around this time my world started to fall apart. I began to hear voices that were **real to me** and **thoughts** that the world was against me. In August of that year, I was diagnosed with a mental illness, paranoid schizophrenia and put on medications. This was more difficult than the problems I had in school. Again, I had to accept this health problem and deal with it. The one thing that I accepted very early in this chapter of my life was that I had to take control and step up to maintain in this world. I also realized that the medication made me feel better and helped me not hear the voices. I now could better control the bad thoughts about others and myself with these medications. I have come to know that medication is a necessity for me to maintain a healthy life. Again, this was another MAINSTREAMED process in my life. Four years after the diagnosis and good management of my medications, I knew that I was in control of this situation. I decided I wanted to go to college.

I was able to locate a college that specialized in educating students with learning disabilities. The college was Beacon College in Leesburg, Florida. This school is designed with teachers who have special skills in teaching this population. This place was great! Not only did it have a program that would help me learn it had nice weather, beaches and Disney World nearby. The program that met my learning needs was a small setting with very good staff support that assisted me with my studies. The first year was not easy for me. I wanted to go home as now I know, most college students do. I managed to stay and this was the best thing that I have ever done. I



developed friendships with staff and students that will last a lifetime. The staff could be a parent when they needed too but they also were our friends. We had mutual respect for each other and enjoyed our fun times together. Finally, in 2004 I graduated with a BA degree in Human Services.

I am now back at home living independently in the community and taking leadership development and peer counseling classes at the DC Center for Independent Living, Inc. I volunteer as an advocate for people with disabilities and try to make a difference in my community. I plan to continue to develop my personal goal of starting my own business. In this business I will be able to use my college skills as I offer a service to others. This is a part of my determination to be in the mix.

I am Itta-ZaVoni Galmore and this is my story.