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Who is the ITA?

The Independent Transition Academy, typically referred to as the ITA, is a program and public school located in South Kingstown RI on the campus of the University of Rhode Island. The ITA is directly behind the Bradford R. Boss Ice Arena in Independence Square. Although the location of the academy is extremely close to where most URI students attend classes, many college students know nothing about the ITA. The overwhelming majority of URI students do not have any idea the school exists. The ITA was started in 2009 with Jennifer Harris in charge intending to create a public school and program for young adults aged 18-21 with disabilities to help them grow and prepare for their future real world endeavors. The program is set out to give young adult students with disabilities an opportunity to better their experience an understanding of what the necessary responsibilities are to be a functioning independent adult.

Since the ITA is located on the URI Kingston campus, the program utilizes it's surroundings. The students benefit from being so close to a social college environment, making trips to the school's library, or using the gym or indoor pools during the week. Harris elaborated on what being so close to the URI campus means to her students every year. "We try and allow our students to get a feel for being in the college environment since many young adults with disabilities do not get to experience that stage of life. Its allows them to feel that sense of freedom and independence we want to instill in them during their time here, along with the other weekly trips we take them on" Harris said.

Every week the ITA sets up a weekly agenda of what each day consists of for the students on a large whiteboard in the main classroom of the ITA building. Each day starts off with the students being responsible for their own personal duties. These vary from helping to clean up, handing out breakfast and lunch to their fellow students, amongst many other jobs that change weekly. The jobs depending on their difficulty reward each student specifically through a small amount of money that is added up and given to them at the end of the week. This usually results in being a gift card or certificate. Harris further explained where this idea of duties and compensation comes from. "We believed this would be a good way to show the students what the responsibility of a job consists of, and the monetary reward gives them a good representation of what they can expect from their employer once they are done here with us." Harris said.

Besides the daily jobs each student is given, the students are also expected to finish daily assignments given to them by Harris, in order to make improvements academically. Harris explained why she enjoys having the students write or type out their daily ideas. "Being able to see what each student takes away from or does not like about each duty, trip, or assignment gives me a greater understanding of how to help get through to them on an independent or general level since they are sharing their feelings with me. Expression is also very important for the students, because when they are out in the world and are given more responsibilities, it is necessary for them to have a keen sense of self expression." Harris said. These students not only develop close relationships with their fellow teachers and classmates, but with the people they meet through weekly activities. Students are taught yoga and other exercises daily by ITA staff members in order to give them physical activity and a sense of relaxation during the day.

The ITA staff brings students to super markets and shows them how to shop for food that is healthy and suitable to their budgets. Harris teaches students how to fill out job applications,

and many times finds opportunities for her students once they graduate. "Year in and year out I do what I can in order to help many of our students establish themselves in a positive working environment where they can make the most out of their day and get financially compensated for their time. Many of our alumni have gone on to have great careers in numerous businesses and that is something I am extremely proud of." Harris said. The ITA teaches their students self-advocacy skills by taking them out into the real world showing them right from wrong, and through journal assignments they are given every week day.

The ITA is an organization that changes lives year in and year out, not only for the students who are involved, but for the outside people who become involved with the students. What Harris has created in the ITA is a program that will continue to benefit the lives of many young adults with disabilities for years to come. This school gives these students the necessary life skills to succeed to the best of their abilities, in a world that is tough for any person to be independent in. Ms. Harris expressed what she most enjoys about doing the type of work that she does year after year.

"Every year the group of students involved grow in and outside of the classroom, but most importantly they grow within themselves. This is a type of job that is not meant for everyone, but I love what I do and would not trade it for the world. Seeing my students grow into the adults many of them have grown into is all credit to their utilization of what they gained from their experiences at the ITA. Every year I am lucky enough to have a new family and form new relationships to young adults that are very near and dear to my heart." Harris said.

