

# MEET THE GRADUATES!

## TSA CELEBRATES GRADUATION DAY

**G**raduation is a rite of passage shared by millions of children and young adults each spring. Whether it marks moving from middle school to high school, high school to college, or signals the beginning of a new life with adult responsibilities, graduations are something to be celebrated. Many members of the TSA family struggle with unusual challenges during their school years. It is especially important that we celebrate their achievements.

When a teacher doesn't "get" TS or classmates are cruel about a tic, graduation may seem a million years away. But graduation day *does* finally arrive. Children with TS *do* grow up and move on. What they do when they graduate is filled with infinite possibility. What follows is a small sample of the graduating members of our family.

### Rachel Floriano

June 2005—High School

**R**achel's favorite subjects were art and photography. This fall, she will attend Hiram College studying, "to become a child psychologist specializing in children with disorders like TS, OCD, autism, etc."

School wasn't always easy for Rachel. Her vocal tics created problems in class and her OCD made writing a huge hurdle to overcome. "I spent hours trying to organize an essay, not being able to get past the first sentence if it wasn't exactly correct." Rachel and her mother developed a system for organizing her thoughts and she can now write an entire term paper on her own from start to finish.

"TS was very difficult in my younger years. I went to a religious school through the eighth grade. I was labeled very early as 'weird' or 'different' and was often the subject of ridicule because of my physical and vocal tics. When I transferred to a public high school, it was much better. I was more accepted because there were more 'different' people like me with all types of problems and disabilities. My TS wasn't such a big deal anymore. Now, while I still struggle with TS and OCD every day, I have friends, am graduating with a 3.61 grade point average, and I have learned to laugh at my disabilities and not take them too seriously. I think having TS made me stronger and gave me the will to study harder and achieve more than if I were what others would call 'normal.' I won a Brush High Wall of Fame Award for seniors who have overcome adversity."

In addition to working hard at school, Rachel worked in the ticket office of the Cain Park Theater, is an active member of TSA Ohio, has spoken at Kent State University, and participated in teen panel discussions. This summer, she'll return to being a counselor at TSA Ohio's Summer Program and one day, hopes to serve on TSA Ohio's Board of Directors.

### Conor McGee

May 2005—High School

**C**onor's advice for other teens with TS is, "It's all about confidence. If you act normal and are sure about yourself, everyone around you will do the same. That's the key to success. Don't sell yourself short, and don't allow anyone to step on you." Conor's natural self-confidence has helped in both his studies and after-school activities. His varied academic interests include journalism, creative writing, history and zoology. And he participated in track, the school newspaper and acted in numerous school plays.

Conor's mature attitude recognizes the direct correlation between the work he put in and the grades he received. "School is just like anything else—you get out of it what you put in. I had periods when I hung out with friends instead of doing homework. My grades suffered. Then I would shape up and do all my work and I got the grades I wanted. If something is important to me, I'll excel at it."

The teachers he liked best were the ones who allowed him to express himself in class. "My opinion is very important to me and I feel freedom of speech is very important. My social justice teacher, Mr. Tackie, always allowed for class discussion and debate. He had strong views of his own, but always let others voice theirs."

Conor plans to celebrate his graduation at the school party at the local YMCA. He will eventually attend college, but wants to travel first. "I need this chance to experience the world and get ready for school again. At this point a summer break just won't be enough."

### Zak Hollis

May 2005—Middle School

**W**hen asked if school was always smooth sailing, Zak has a ready reply, "Yeah, right. Completely smooth. Just kidding. It's been rough. I have had a lot of difficulties with school, but that got better as I got older and moved into middle school. Once my mom was allowed to educate the school on TS, the teasing got better."

Zak's tics interfere with both academic and social aspects, but accommodations have improved his life at school. "Speech recognition software and a read-aloud program help me. In sixth grade, the School Principal Mrs. Hamilton, let me eat lunch in her office when times were tough. I just didn't do well in the cafeteria with the noise and stuff, so it made school more enjoyable and less stressful."

With a lot of work, and a little help, Zak's grades improved and his involvement in school activities increased. He was asked to join

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