

# Clifton Donaldson Blevins, III Bio

As a soft wind blows through the trees, children play in the park, while mothers sit on the grass and exchange stories and lend support to one another. At that moment, a two year old named Clifton wanders over to where the mothers are gathered. He squats down to touch the one of the mother's toenails that is painted in a bright color. Clifton's mother quickly redirects his attention back to the playground where he stands next to the other children playing under the jungle gym. But he doesn't join in their games, or play with another child using a shovel and pail to build a sand castle. Instead, Clifton scoops sand into one hand, and slowly pours it into his mouth, and swallows it. Once again, Clifton's mother rushes over, and redirects him to another play area.

These behaviors, taken by themselves, might not alarm anyone raising toddlers. But as Clifton grew, it was clear that something else was going on. And by the age of 5, Clifton was diagnosed with High Functioning Autism in the Fall of his Kindergarten year at View Accelerated Charter School. At the time, his mother Sharnell was a stay-at-home mom who was pregnant with her sixth child. And his father, also named Clifton, worked in the Financial Services industry. After the Developmental Pediatrician concluded that Clifton was indeed on the autism spectrum, Clifton's parents met with View Park administrators to inform them of the diagnosis. Up to that point, it had been an emotional rollercoaster trying to determine what caused Clifton to be different than his siblings and peers during his pre-school years. So for Clifton's parents, there was a sense of relief to finally get a diagnosis and a plan to help him.



With encouragement and references from the Developmental Pediatrician, Clifton and Sharnell searched for educators and people who understood autism and could help their son navigate the world around him. View Park administrators suggested that he finish his Kindergarten year at a school closer to his home, and then return a year later to repeat the Kindergarten year in their accelerated program. View Park's autism consultant, who happened to be an employee of the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD), asked what the name of the home school was for Clifton. When the parents answered that it was Leapwood Avenue Elementary, she strongly suggested that they move Clifton there because the school was recognized internationally for its autism program. And so by the Winter break, Clifton and Sharnell enrolled their son into Leapwood.



As a student at Leapwood, Clifton's world opened up to other children and people outside of his own family. People with autism often expect and need life to be predictable, and follow the same routine every day. At Leapwood, Clifton learned how to adjust when the unpredictable occurred in his daily routine. Ms. Judy Blumenthal, his first teacher, was instrumental in exposing Clifton and other autistic kids to the world around them. Ms. Judy, as she is known, planned both academic and social exercises that taught Clifton how to handle common situations, as well as how to think through problems due to unforeseen circumstances. In a world in which identifying someone with high functioning autism can be difficult due to the subtle and concealed traits, Ms. Judy arranged field trips to the supermarket and other places that taught her students how to interact with the general public. Clifton excelled and continued his education in subsequent grades with Ms. Jan Aguon, who championed his progress and transitioned him into a mainstreamed academic curriculum.

Clifton matriculated to Stephen White Middle School. At that time, Stephen White had a three pronged program for their students with high functioning autism - 1) a fully mainstreamed academic curriculum, with a social skills elective, 2) a resource program that paralleled general education classes, with a social skills elective, and 3) a full immersion special day program that focused exclusively on children with autism. Clifton was academically ready for the fully mainstreamed program, but District officials were concerned that since he had been in a full immersion special day program in elementary school, he would not transition well into a fully mainstreamed program.



Although Clifton's parents felt he was ready for the fully mainstreamed program, they took the administrator's opinion into account and settled on the resource class program, with a social skills elective. Clifton thrived academically as a sixth grader, and was a straight A student. He was mainstreamed into Math and English classes in his seventh grade year, and fully mainstreamed into general education classes by the eighth grade. Administrators at the school were advocates for Clifton and fought for him to receive the academic support he needed to continue to achieve. For example, his history teacher noticed that Clifton struggled with expressing his thoughts fully when he wrote them on paper, and relied on short answers. The teacher felt that Clifton knew far more about the subject than he was able to write out in clear penmanship. So she initiated the process to obtain adaptive technology for Clifton in the form of a notepad computer that would allow him to type out his essays and term papers. The results were easier to read, longer, and more thoughtful essays and answers from Clifton in his homework assignments. He continued to be a straight A student and culminated middle school with honors.



At the conclusion of middle school, Clifton's Individualized Educational Program (IEP) team determined that Clifton would be better served in a high school with a small student population. As much as Clifton excelled academically at Stephen White Middle School, his social skills did not keep pace. Part of the reason was that the social skills elective class that Clifton had been a part of was changed, and the focus was no longer on the specialized issues of high functioning autistic students. In addition, not all of the teachers in Clifton's mainstreamed academic classes were fully equipped to help Clifton develop the social skills needed to interact with the other pre-teens and teenagers on a middle school campus. Clifton had no behavioral problems, but was a quiet person with few friends, and the IEP team believed that he may get lost in the shuffle on a large high school campus, and at risk for being a target of bullying. Clifton had, in fact, been the victim of two bullying incidents in middle school. So Clifton's IEP team recommended that non-public schools were an option for his high school placement. Unfortunately, LAUSD did not have a high functioning autism program in the Local District South where Clifton resided.

After reviewing several schools, both public and private, Clifton and his parents chose The Help Group Village Glen's Core program. THG Village Glen is a school designed around the needs of the student with autism. Its' Core program is designed for the student who would traditionally be mainstreamed academically, and whose goal is to enter a four year university after graduation from high school. At Village Glen, Clifton would be in an environment with other students who were on the autism spectrum or experienced other social challenges. It was the proper choice for Clifton, and he is thriving at the school. He often states that he loves the challenge of his homework, and also loves being around kids who are like him and understand him.

Clifton is at the top of his class at THG Village Glen, and has maintained his straight A grades. Clifton's parents believe the small class sizes and focus on developing his social skills as well as his academic prowess have been instrumental in helping Clifton develop as a student and person. Clifton is now a junior at the school, and is looking forward to applying to college where he would like to study History and English beginning in the fall of 2018.



The state of California and LAUSD have made great strides in helping students with disabilities. Many of the improvements have helped students who have moderate to severe learning or physical disabilities. As parents of a child with autism, Clifton's parents would like to see more programs that help the students with high functioning autism/aspergers syndrome, in particular. Many of these students are not as successful academically as Clifton. They are placed in a mainstreamed academic environment where the teachers are often unaware of the challenges that a student on the autism spectrum faces. As a result, many of these students do not receive the support they need, succumb to behavioral problems, and drop out of school.

Like all children, kids with autism are capable of learning, and have talent in a particular area or subject matter. It is imperative that teachers and school administrators are trained to identify the signs of autism, and are aware of the resources available to the child and their parents. The bottom line is that these students can have successful careers, have families, and be productive citizens in our society. They are often high level problem solvers, and they have a role in today's workforce. It just takes a little more effort by those of us who can make a difference in school districts throughout California and the country to provide programs that support their development as both students and people.