



Seeing Independence Spotlight – Mira Gaitanis

This is the first of LBB's Seeing Independence Spotlight. LBB will begin sharing the journey of individuals in our community who are blind or have a visual impairment. We are excited to begin the series sharing the journey of Mira Gaitanis.

Mira was born with Retinopathy of Prematurity, but this has not stopped her from developing into a force of nature! Through the support of her parents, she has become a strong advocate for herself. In fact, she has led her own Individualized Educational Program meetings since fifth grade. These tools among others have proven essential to building the independent living skills that are vital for her success in college.

While some teachers understand her needs for large print (for assignments and other documents), extra time to complete assignments and exams, and the use of assistive technology (screen readers), there are still teachers out there that she has to educate on the importance of her accommodations and inclusive education. She is confident she can do the work and be successful once her barriers are eliminated and perceptions are changed.

The Florida Department of Blind Services and Florida Division of Vocational Rehabilitation are two agencies that have also been instrumental helping Mira achieve her goals and live a productive and independent life. The Florida Division of Blind Services provided a monocular and other assistive technology which have been vital to her success in navigating the world, both in and outside of the classroom. The Florida Low Vision Initiative (FLVI) taught monocular skills to Mira in elementary school and made sure she was reading and writing comparable to her peers. They also taught orientation & mobility skills ensuring she was able to navigate her world independently. She later recorded videos with FLVI to help students grow in their Monocular skills.

Given Mira's disability, she is required to put in 2-3 times the work and time as her peers because studying and exams require a longer time commitment. Fortunately, her hard work and determination has contributed to her success. In high school, she was in honors advanced placement classes and is now in the honors program at Florida State University.

Advocacy continues to be a theme in Mira's life. When she was invited by the State of Florida to speak at Florida's Disability History and Awareness Weeks her senior year in high school, she quickly learned the importance of sharing her ideas to bring awareness to leaders and decision makers in the education community. She was then asked to speak at the Florida Department of Education Administration Management Meeting which kickstarted more opportunities to share important thoughts to a larger community.

Mira recommendations for others is to use all of the accessibility tools available to reach your goals. She also thinks planning and thinking ahead of what you will need to reach your goals is essential. The culmination of Mira's success is clearly a combination of her hard work, strong family support, and taking advantage of the resources available.