

# Finding his place

*Disabled man  
draws on his own  
experiences to  
help others*

BY APRIL WILKERSON  
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OKLAHOMA CITY - If anyone knows about surviving, it's Shad Isaac.

The 20-year-old was born with a multitude of problems - spina bifida, fetal alcohol syndrome, fluid on the brain - and he learned to be a fighter early in life.

But Isaac not only endured years of painful surgeries and physical therapy. Now he's in an employment program that allows him to start a career and give back to others who are taking his same journey.

Isaac is part of Project SEARCH, in which eight young adults with disabilities serve as interns at Mercy Health Center; those who complete the program will be placed in permanent jobs around the metro. The national program is a local partnership between Mercy, Francis Tuttle Technology Center, the Oklahoma Department of Rehabilitation Services and the National Center for Disability Education and Training at the University of Oklahoma.

Today, Isaac goes to work in Mercy's outpatient therapy center in the very setting he visited for all of his growing-up years.

"It's a real accomplishment. I'm really happy," Isaac said. "When I was a little kid, I was going through what they're going through, and now I'm at the same place helping them. I was a patient for so long, and now it's pretty cool to work in a hospital and not be a patient."

For his internship, Isaac helps the therapists and patients in various ways. He gathers ice packs and weights, changes linens, cleans equipment and checks people's temperatures.

He said interacting with the patients is especially rewarding for him.

"I tell them that I've been through the same thing and that if I can come out of rehab, they can too," he said. "It



Shad Isaac of Oklahoma City in his new role as an intern in outpatient therapy at Mercy Health Center. Isaac received many years of therapy at Mercy and has returned as an employee. COURTESY PHOTO

won't necessarily be easy, but if you work at it enough, you'll come out of it. I tell them not to give up."

Isaac received that same kind of encouragement when he underwent surgeries and constant physical therapy from about age 2 to age 12. Five surgeries to release the tendons from his spine left him in severe pain and having to start over with his rehab after each one.

Today's he's primarily bound to a wheelchair, but he is active in basketball, kayaking, rock climbing, weight lifting and basketball. Isaac credits his mother, Linda Isaac, with seeing him through to where he is today.

"It was like she would give me a new battery," he said. "She'd say, 'Shad, you can do this. I have faith in you. Don't let

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up.”

Linda Isaac took Shad into her family as a foster child when he was 8 months old and weighed only 4.5 pounds, and soon she adopted him. Linda said his favorite book as a child was *The Little Engine That Could*, and he modeled his life after its refrain: “I think I can, I think I can.”

But his internship through Project SEARCH has given him a different kind of boost, she said.

“We didn’t know what would happen when he got out of high school,” she said. “We knew we needed to find something for him to do, but the family was at a loss. This has turned out to be a comfort zone for him to learn in. It has given him so much more self-confidence. He had self-confidence from sports, but this has given him confidence about his future. He will definitely have a future; he won’t be just drawing Social Security and doing nothing.”

Kay Davis, a Mercy physical therapist who worked with Isaac during much of his childhood, said the internship is a perfect fit because he was a child who succeeded in his own rehabilitation. Davis built elaborate obstacle courses for Isaac because he thrived on challenges; he was something of a “pediatric Indiana Jones,” she said.

“Nothing ever seemed too hard for him,” Davis said.

Isaac understands what therapy patients are going through, Davis said, so his presence as an employee is particularly meaningful. When Isaac was a child, Davis saw compassion and interaction in him, and those qualities are still present as an adult, she said.

“He’s kind of an ambassador of hope,” Davis said. “His is a special kind of hope – one that he’s absolutely had to live through. Project SEARCH is a fabulous opportunity that allows limitless possibilities for him, and he’s learning things and having experiences that seem to make him want it more.”