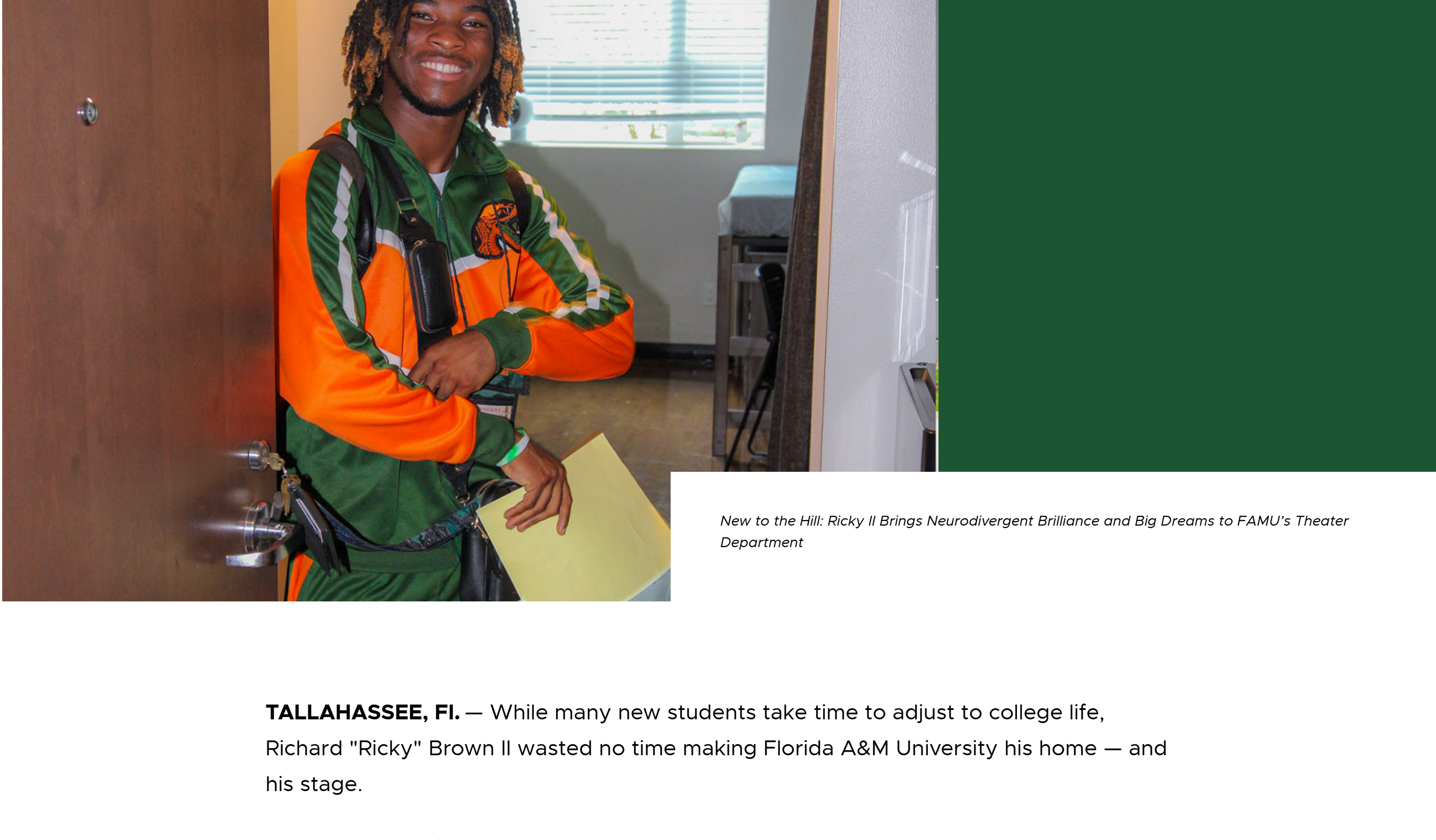


New to the Hill: Ricky II Brings Neurodivergent Brilliance and Big Dreams to FAMU's Theater Department

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By Ashley Flete



New to the Hill: Ricky II Brings Neurodivergent Brilliance and Big Dreams to FAMU's Theater Department

TALLAHASSEE, FL — While many new students take time to adjust to college life, Richard "Ricky" Brown II wasted no time making Florida A&M University his home — and his stage.

Just one week after graduating from high school in Virginia, the incoming theater major arrived in Tallahassee with purpose, passion and a U-Haul in tow. By the end of his first week on the Hill, he had already danced during a student showcase, won three homecoming step show tickets, and become a familiar face among his Class of 2029 peers.



Brown takes it all in before stepping into his new home for the summer. (Photo by Treyvon Eugene / FAMU Communications Intern)

"I am pretty hyped to be here on the 'Highest of Seven Hills,'" Ricky II said, his excitement unmistakable. "It feels like I belong here."

"He is beyond getting acclimated," said his mother, El Brown, Ph.D., with a proud laugh. "He's not just adjusting — he's living. I got a video from another parent of the freshman class doing the Rattler Strike, and there he was, front and center."

But Ricky II's journey to FAMU wasn't always the plan — at least not at first.

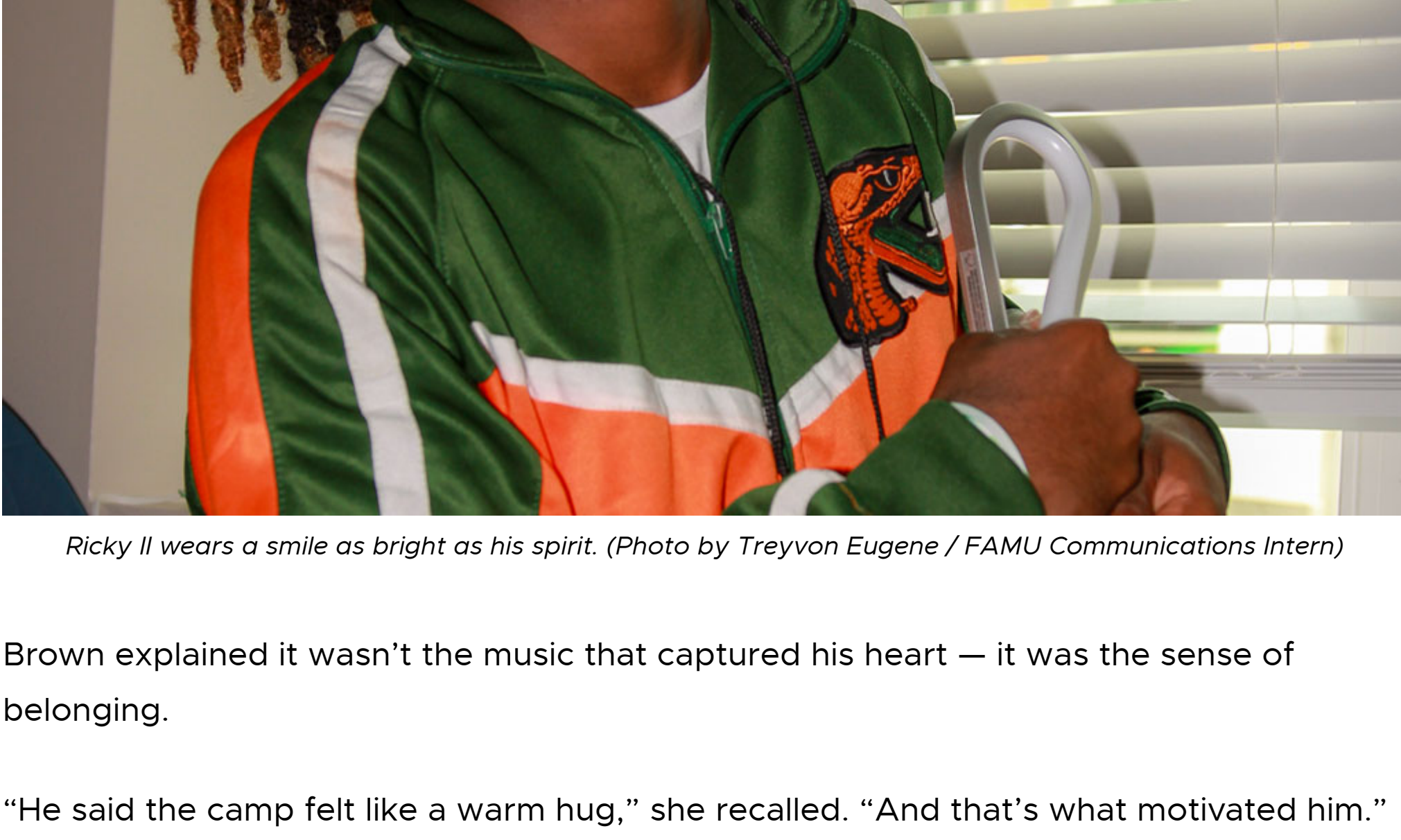


Ricky II poses with a student volunteer and his mother before seeing his room. (Photo by Treyvon Eugene / FAMU Communications Intern)

Diagnosed with autism at age 4 1/2, his mother initially envisioned a different path for her son, one focused on marketable trades like HVAC or barbering.

"That was based on my own limiting beliefs," she admitted. "I just wanted him to be self-sufficient. But he went to FAMU band camp and saw a field full of role models, and everything changed. He told me, 'Mom, I feel like I was born to go to FAMU.'"

Now, four years later, here he is.



Ricky II wears a smile as bright as his spirit. (Photo by Treyvon Eugene / FAMU Communications Intern)

Brown explained it wasn't the music that captured his heart — it was the sense of belonging.

"He said the camp felt like a warm hug," she recalled. "And that's what motivated him."

Now a theater major concentrating in production and design, Ricky II dreams of designing immersive, sensory-considerate amusement park environments for neurodivergent guests like himself.

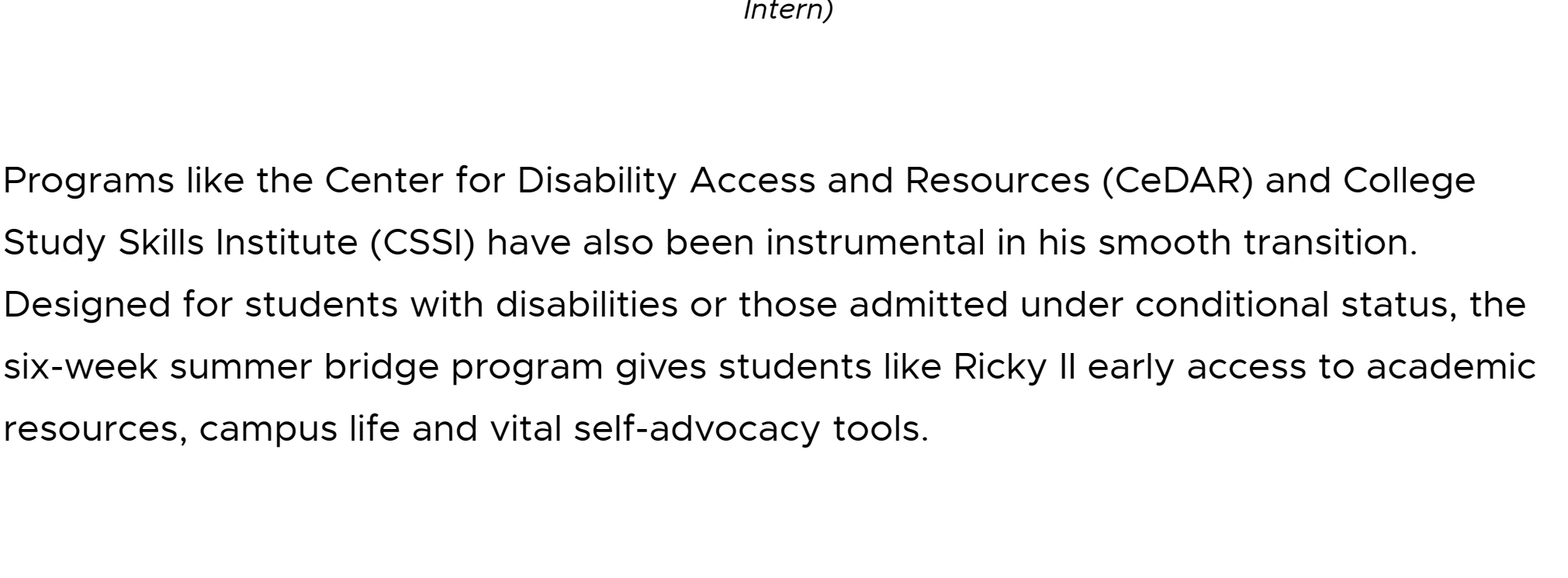
That mission became clear to him after riding the VelociCoaster at Universal Orlando, where he encountered a ride designed with sensory awareness — no overwhelming lights, sounds or scents.

"He looked at me and said, 'I want to do more of that,'" Brown said. "From the queue to the ride, he didn't feel overwhelmed — he felt seen."

His dream internship? Working with Universal Creative, the minds behind Universal's signature experiences.

In addition to his academic goals, Ricky II joined FAMU's summer band camp, where he earned a spot as a drum major — a role that cemented both his leadership and growing confidence.

"Believe it or not, it has taken me some time to realize it," he reflected. "I know the time has come, but it has really taken some time. This is truly an indescribable experience."



Ricky II's mother beams with happiness during Move-In. (Photo by Treyvon Eugene / FAMU Communications Intern)

Programs like the Center for Disability Access and Resources (CeDAR) and College Study Skills Institute (CSSI) have also been instrumental in his smooth transition. Designed for students with disabilities or those admitted under conditional status, the six-week summer bridge program gives students like Ricky II early access to academic resources, campus life and vital self-advocacy tools.

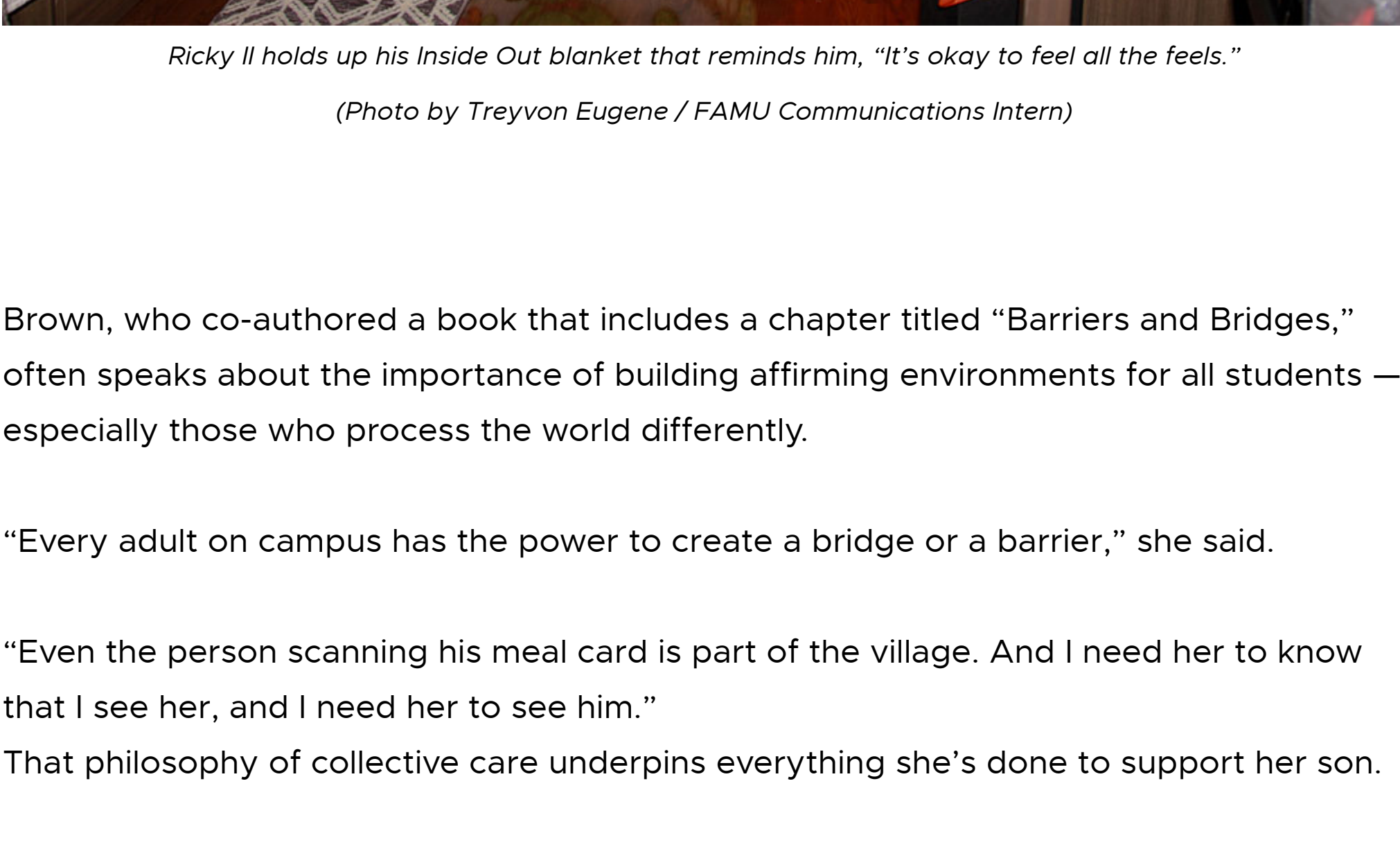
"One of the things we encourage is independence," said Deborah Sullivan, director of CeDAR. "And Ricky is already doing that. He came to my office to advocate for himself about a placement test — and he did it beautifully."

Ricky II also uses tools like ChatGPT to support his emotional development and navigate social interactions.

"He has his own paid account," Brown said. "He asks it questions about emotions, scripts conversations, and even uses it to decode facial expressions. It's been a game changer."

Sullivan, who has watched both Ricky II and his mother advocate for inclusivity on and off campus, said their impact is already rippling outward.

"I did a podcast interview with Dr. Brown, and afterward, I got so many emails," Sullivan said. "Other students enrolled in CeDAR because of their story. They're trailblazers — for real."



Ricky II holds up his Inside Out blanket that reminds him, "It's okay to feel all the feels." (Photo by Treyvon Eugene / FAMU Communications Intern)

Brown, who co-authored a book that includes a chapter titled "Barriers and Bridges," often speaks about the importance of building affirming environments for all students — especially those who process the world differently.

"Every adult on campus has the power to create a bridge or a barrier," she said.

"Even the person scanning his meal card is part of the village. And I need her to know that I see her, and I need her to see him."

That philosophy of collective care underpins everything she's done to support her son.

"My child is your child," she added. "And if my child is neurodivergent, now you have a neurodivergent child too."

Brown said her approach to education has always prioritized progress over perfection.

"What does an A really mean?" she asked. "I focus on goals, growth and grit. Still, the only C he earned in high school was in pre-calculus — his final semester."

The family's move to FAMU was fast but deeply intentional.

"We literally left graduation with the U-Haul," Brown said. "He graduated Monday, packed Tuesday, movers came Wednesday, and we were in Tallahassee by Friday. Monday, he started orientation. It all just felt aligned."

And as for independence? Ricky II has that covered.

"He told me, 'Mom, I got it now. I'll see you in six weeks,'" she said. "I told him, 'You'll see me tomorrow,' but I knew what he meant. He's ready."

From the warmth of FAMU's band camp to the quiet support of staff and social tools, Ricky II's first few weeks on the Hill have laid the foundation for something far greater than a semester. His story is a celebration of what happens when students are seen, supported and given the space to shine.

"Ricky II is a way-maker," Brown said. "He's showing what's possible when passion meets preparation — and when a university makes room for all types of brilliance."



Mothers and their legacies pose for a group photo as they officially join the FAMULY. (Photo by Treyvon Eugene / FAMU Communications Intern)

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