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Finding the rhythm of life

By Kristin Johnson / Fairfax County Times Dec 13, 2024 1

KinderJam

Richard Franklin Brown II is known to most people as Ricky II. He is a hardworking, conscientious, and positive senior at Falls Church High School, a drum major for the Marching Jaguars. This summer, after he graduates, he will head to Tallahassee, Fla., to attend Florida A&M University, one of the country's top Historically Black Colleges and Universities. He is also on the autism spectrum. His journey to Florida started in earnest about four years ago.

GARY RUBIN

El Brown, his mother, first showed him a video of FAMU summer band camp in 2019. She is a graduate of the school. He immediately knew he wanted to go. There was no band camp in 2020, but when 2021 rolled around, he was ready. His mother stayed in town to make sure things ran smoothly. They had one goal for band camp; Ricky II was to make one friend.

"I didn't just make friends. My mom remembered, with tears in my eyes, saying I was born to go to FAMU," said Ricky II.

At camp, he had found his purpose and his people. The Browns were unsure what they needed to do to make his dream happen, but they knew he had to keep his grades up and continue advocating with his teachers.

Courtesy Photo

"One of the things that I appreciate the most is that when we identified his passion, it became something that intrinsically motivated him. So now, he holds a 3.8 GPA at school. He's in pre-calculus. He's in the National Honor Society," said El.

Ricky II understands who he is and can assess his current limitations in most situations. When he encounters a roadblock, he seeks help.

GARY RUBIN

"We have this thing called big deal, little deal. So little deals are things where he's venting to me. Big deals are where he's saying, I can't navigate this on my own just yet. Can you come in," explained El. When it came to calculus, "I was able to reach out to someone in our village who happens to be in California."

They contacted a professor who has worked with students with diverse learning needs. Ricky II gets up twice weekly at 8 a.m. for a Zoom call for pre-calculus coaching. The Browns credit a village of friends and educators who have stepped up to guide and help Ricky II meet and exceed his goals. The village includes administrators and staff at Fairfax County Public Schools who helped find alternative solutions to help Ricky II, several music and band teachers, and older drum majors who have inspired and befriended him.

Hard work is nothing new for him. He has had a personal mantra since he was three. "I can be anything I want to be if I plan and work hard for it." Ricky II eventually switched the word "if" to "when" because it made for a stronger statement.

"The word 'if' sounds like you're not really into it," explained Ricky II. "If you think of 'when,' that means you're having the full commitment of doing it, and you know that you're going to do it."

When he is not studying, Ricky II is often surrounded by his passion—music. El's Instagram is full of photos of Ricky II working through songs with a baton in hand.

Over the last four years, he has earned respect at FAMU band camps and in his high school band. He is quick to point out that respect does not always lead to friendship. Ricky II is a keen social observer who admits some people overlook him because of his stutter. He has learned to use their assumptions to his advantage.

Shortly after graduation, the Browns will head to Florida. Ricky II is part of the university's Center for Disability Access and Resources program, which is designed to help students with disabilities acclimate before the campus is full. He will live on campus, but his mother will settle into a place nearby. She is moving at her son's request.

(1) comment

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AAPL · Apple	245.50	+7.62 +3.20%
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- 500
- 900
- 1000
- 1300+

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