



In his senior year in high school, then 19-year-old David Vinsonhaler was in a difficult spot.

Living alone in the very small town of Macksville outside Pratt with no family, no transportation, and no job income, he said he was so troubled he even attempted suicide.

“I had little or no direction in my life,” he said. “I had no faith in what I could do. I was moody, emotional...I’m diagnosed with manic depression. My teachers had to put up with quite a lot.”

But help from a high school teacher and then from a series of assistance agencies has David on track. Now 21, he works full-time as a medication aide in a senior center, has his own apartment, car, and computer, and plans to gain additional education to continue a career in health care. He even has a very active kitten scampering through the rooms of his apartment.

Help for David -- who is diagnosed with a developmental disability -- came first from his resource teacher at Macksville High School. Patty Sanders said she recognized David had a home environment that did not provide a lot of support. She also said she recognized he had lots of potential. .

When his family decided to move before he could complete high school, David said he didn't want to leave with them and wanted to finish high school in Macksville.

"We started looking at what options there were," Mrs. Sanders said.

Those options, which included finding David a subsidized apartment, recruiting a church ladies group in Macksville to provide food and finding other town members to donate furniture and transportation, eventually paid dividends.

Today, as David walks down the hallways of Lakewood Senior Living in Pratt where he works, residents and nurses perk up as he greets everyone by name. With assistance first from Prairie Independent Living Resource Center and then from Kansas Rehabilitation Services, David earned a certificate as a nurse's aide and got the job at a senior center. Then he went back to school on his own to become a Certified Medication Aide, increasing his job responsibilities and income.

David was also set up with counseling with the Special Education Cooperative in Pratt, which he said helped him work through some personal issues. The therapy was done through the Kansas University Telemedicine program, where David talked to a therapist on television via a computer hook-up.

"David is pretty flexible and does lots of things for us," said Robin Saffle, the executive director of Lakewood Senior Living. "There are lots of areas we use his skills. We appreciate him."

Billy Thompson, an Independent Living Specialist with the resource center in Pratt, said Mrs. Sanders got the ball rolling getting David on the right track by contacting his agency after David's breakdown and suicide attempt. Mr. Thompson still works with David as David prepares

for additional college education.

“She did the right thing by getting him to us, then we contacted Rehabilitation Services,” Mr. Thompson said. “I helped him with independent living skills, and Rehabilitation Services helped with transportation and school costs.”

Mr. Thompson also said it was David’s determination to succeed which brought about his success.

Mrs. Sanders said it was after David’s suicide attempt -- which she thinks came about because of loneliness -- and his week-long stay at Larned State Hospital that he seemed to find his career.

“He came back and told me about all the people he talked to at the hospital,” she said. “It seemed like he knew the right thing to say to those people. I told David he’d be good with older people; he’d be good at helping other people, helping to heal others.”

David now says he wants to take his work in health care further.

“Health care is kind of a family thing,” he said. “My great grandmother was a nurse, and her father was a doctor. I have a grandmother who was a nurse and my mom worked in a nursing home.”

In a year or so, he plans to move to Hays and attend Fort Hays University, where he wants to study radiology. Until then, he’ll continue with his job at the senior center and take additional classes at Pratt Community College where he earned his nurse’s aide certificates. He said his job at the senior center includes giving pills to residents, taking vital signs, checking blood-sugar levels, and many other duties.

“I try to be as helpful as I can,” he said.

