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For young adults with autism, LifeWorks at WKU offers community

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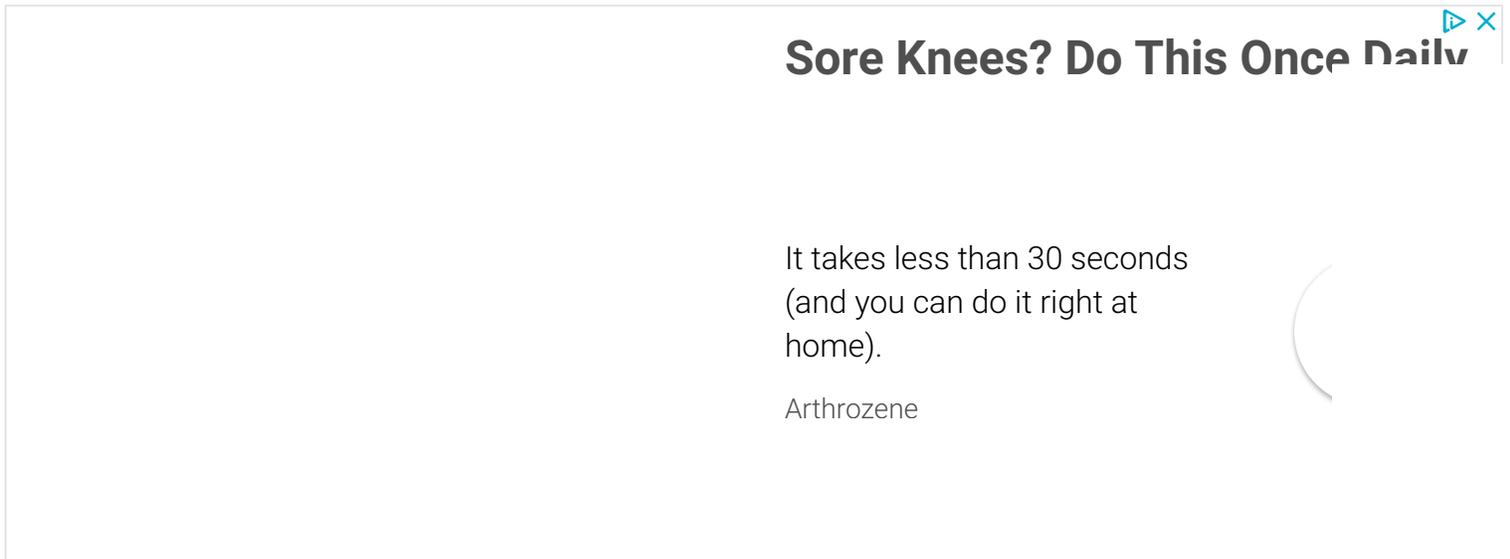


From left, LifeWorks at WKU Life Coach Hendrix Brakefield helps participants fondue during a cooking class at LifeWorks at WKU, a new program at Western Kentucky University for young adults with autism spectrum disorder and other learning differences, at the facility on Adair Street. LifeWorks offers young adult students with autism a hands-on experience with finding a job and developing the skills they need to support themselves in the workforce. (Grace Ramey/photo@bgdailynews.com)

Grace Ramey

Back when he was attending Western Kentucky University, Andy Arnold had a home on the Hill. He made the Dean’s List, the President’s List, aced an independent study course and was president of the Religious Studies Club and the university’s Quiz Bowl team.

But after he graduated in 2019, there weren’t a lot of ready-made paths for someone on the autism spectrum.

An advertisement for Arthrozene. The top right corner features a play button icon and a close 'X' icon. The main headline reads "Sore Knees? Do This Once Daily". Below this, the text states "It takes less than 30 seconds (and you can do it right at home)." and "Arthrozene". On the right side of the ad, there is a partial view of a person's knee.

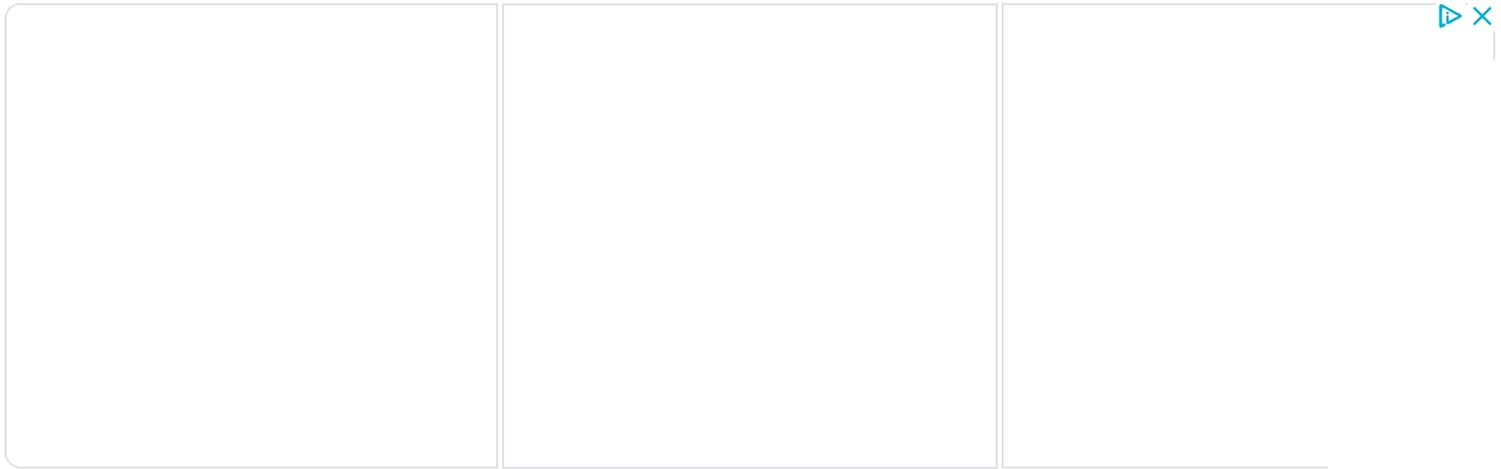
That changed when he was invited to join LifeWorks at WKU.

“It’s a place that’s truly mine, and that’s a very new and interesting feeling for me,” Arnold said of the two-year LifeWorks Transition Academy, which is offering housing to young autistic adults who crave independence and employment.

Based in a renovated apartment complex behind the Suzanne Vitale Clinical Education Complex at WKU, LifeWorks is the only program of its kind in Kentucky.

Through LifeWorks, Arnold has an apartment of his own, where the 27-year-old enjoys cooking and tidying up. Asked what he personally wants to get out of the program, Arnold

said he wants a job, a shot at living on his own and “standing up on my own two feet.”



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“I think that there’s a lot of misconceptions about autism,” Arnold said. “I think there’s a social norm that autistic people are expected to just conform to the whims of our normal society. And after people turn 18, they’re often at the mercy of their family or the system at large. And there’s very little support system for autistic adults.”

About 1 in 54 children are diagnosed with autism, though currently 85% of college graduates with autism are unemployed or underemployed, according to national data.

Through its Transition Academy, LifeWorks is offering a 32-course curriculum designed with young adults with autism in mind. They get help with finding a job, the skills they need to support themselves and a community of peers going through the same experience.

“The focus of the Transition Academy is that they come for two years and they receive instruction, but they also have experience in business here, whether it’s an internship or a

job, preferably the goal is employment,” said Mary Lloyd Moore, who helms the Clinical Education Complex as its executive director.

“So they’ll be able to work at whatever in whatever job capacity they want. They’ll be able to live in their apartments and in the community. They’ll be able to engage in community activities and give back to the community through the volunteer aspects,” Moore said.

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“We realize that it’s going to take us a year or two or three to reach that capacity, but we’re confident that we will,” Moore said. “We’re hoping to be a model program for other communities because we know that what’s going on here really is going to be an asset for the individuals and a reassurance for families that their loved ones are on the path that they choose.”

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Education reporter. Covers education and related issues, focusing primarily on the Bowling Green and Warren County public school districts and Western Kentucky University.