

First Buddy House student joins WKU program

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Western Kentucky University freshman Claire Lanham is hugged by her mother Beth (left) and Down Syndrome of South Central Kentucky Executive Director Stephanie Morton (right) as she gets emotional after hearing that she received the inaugural \$1,000 scholarship from the Buddy House on Tuesday, Aug. 19, 2025, through her participation in WKU's SAV-Y program, a three-year program that provides students with intellectual disabilities the opportunity to attend WKU courses to acquire workplace skills and gain college experience. GRACE MCDOWELL / BOWLING GREEN DAILY NEWS











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For Claire Lanham, who has Down syndrome, the diagnosis she lives with isn't on her mind. When others presume she needs different treatment, *that's* the problem. Challenges, especially close to friends, represent opportunity.

On Tuesday, she began classes at Western, met sorority sisters at Alpha Gamma Delta and won an inaugural \$1,000 scholarship from the nonprofit Down Syndrome Center of South Central Kentucky, better known as the Buddy House. This "Beyond Limits" scholarship

serves students of Western's SAV-Y program, a three-year pathway spanning social expectations, academics and vocational opportunities such as internships, for people with intellectual disabilities.

Lanham, the Buddy House's first student in SAV-Y, bawled as center Board President Eric Leach formally announced her scholarship.

"I want to try this scholarship because I want (...) to be with my other friends on campus and off campus as well," she said.

"They really inspire me a lot."

Lanham's family and local advocates hope her time on campus and course attendance will contribute to the modern-day's continual shift in perspective surrounding neurodivergent people and individuals with disabilities: that they, including people with Down syndrome, differ with the same breadth as neurotypical individuals, and that presumptions about abilities are limiting.

Lanham has cheered for 10 years. She can speak more than most at the Buddy House. Some areas of thought, particularly math, are difficult for her and require more repetitions than they would for most neurotypical people.

But when her father asks if she wanted to take physics, she affirms it.

"That may have just explained it right there," he says.

He had expected her to say no. But, her father adds, "We try to leave those doors open."

Claire Lanham nods.

SAV-Y

Nineteen years old, and the first student with Down syndrome at SAV-Y, she intends to explore potential career pathways at WKU.

SAV-Y is one of six Comprehensive Transition and Postsecondary programs statewide, initiatives enabling students with intellectual disabilities to take higher education courses.

Year-one SAV-Y students take program courses on social skills as well as general education courses that benefit social skills and social life on campus, program Director Michael Matney said. Year two entails classes in an academic area of interest as well as more SAV-Y classes in finance, health, and independence. Third-years take SAV-Y classes, two career track courses and at least one internship per semester for on-the-job experience in the academic area they chose to pursue.

While courses can be taken for credit, they're usually audited. But students earn what are known as micro-credentials, competency-based recognitions of accomplishments. For websites and apps such as LinkedIn, SAV-Y enrollees can attach micro-credential badges to their resumes for each year they complete, along with indicators of competencies in specific areas, and a final, larger badge upon program completion.

With the program serving its first student who has Down syndrome, Matney said that he's excited for the program to broaden the types of disabilities it serves.

"I don't want parents to think, 'My student's disability means that they could never do that,'" he said.

Claire Lanham

Family and friends who've known Claire Lanham for more than a decade describe her as driven, a great judge of character and a rule-follower – but more than anything else, someone who takes care of others.

She would get the light for the class in school. Ensure classmates had lined up for lunch. Assisted teachers when and where she could.

Her father recalled when, at 3 years old, she was hugging family goodbye at a hotel lobby, and a group of strangers who walked in seemed to appreciate looking on. Each got a goodbye-hug, too.

"It was kind of like her ability to read their emotions," Derek Lanham said. " 'I see people and want to take care of them' has always been her attitude through life."

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