

# **My Experience With CTE and Its Impact**

## **Introduction**

My name is Mike and 16 years ago I was a student at CTE, Essex, Vermont. I was a 2-year student and those two years were the most transformational two years of my life in terms of academics, my social life and of who I became as an individual.

Growing up and going through school, I wasn't considered what would be a "normal" or "average" student in terms of academics; learning was a struggle and the usual learning environments that consisted of a bunch of students with one teacher wasn't the best fit for me either. I had multiple learning disabilities that prevented me from being able to keep up with other students even though I very badly wanted to do so. I learned differently than some and to go along with those disabilities, I was also diagnosed with autism at a very young age making the classroom environment that much more confusing. The reason I am bringing up my early experiences in school and as an individual with some learning barriers is to emphasize the importance of what a program like CTE did for someone like me, a learner like me.

## **Why I Chose CTE**

So entering high school, I was still the same student with the same struggles but during my Sophomore year, I was invited to an open house showcasing the various programs available at CTE and not really knowing what to expect, I was very intrigued by the table labeled as "Computer Animation & Web Page Design" or what is known today as "CAWD". I knew right then what I wanted to start exploring. So the journey started; a meeting was setup with my parents and the teacher of this program so I could be properly introduced. I chose CTE because I saw, at the time, what looked like an alternative to the learning I had been experiencing my whole life to that point and thought I could further influence my creative talents through this program. I'm very glad I chose to do so because not only did this program enable and empower me to be creative and explore my interests but it was also a turning point for how my learning disabilities and autism play out in a school setting which leads to a very important follow up question:

## **What Made My Time at CTE Worthwhile?**

During my time with CTE, I learned many valuable tools and had access to many valuable resources that empowered me to build a diverse palette of skills for both the creative space and the tech space. I was fortunate enough to be able to play around with a multitude of programs and software ranging from 3D Studio Max giving me the opportunity to build 3D models and renderings as well as animation. I got to learn Adobe software such as Photoshop where I could experiment with image manipulation and create digital illustrations. Then I got to jump into the programming space with Dreamweaver and learn how to build websites and web applications using HTML, CSS and JavaScript. Yes, I got to learn a lot of great things all while spending time in a classroom that consisted of team work and a more individualized approach to teaching and learning. The support I received when entering the program continued throughout my time spent there among teachers and students. Being a young student going through CTE and the CAWD program, I was lucky enough to be empowered and I am forever grateful for that opportunity. These two years at CTE were transformational and influential because:

- I grew academically; I was provided with an alternative to learning -- a hands-on approach and a more individualized classroom setting that puts the student first in a school that understands the different types of learners that are out there.

- I grew socially; as someone on the autism spectrum I find the world of communication and socializing a little confusing but spending two years with a great group of students and teachers allowed me to discover and understand the world around me a lot better.

- and most importantly, I grew as an individual ready and prepared for the road ahead into a future in which I am able to put the tools, resources and empowerment I have acquired to good use.

So CTE was worthwhile because to this very day, 16 years after graduating from Essex High School and the CTE program, I am working in an industry where I continue to use the tools I have learned while at CTE. CTE gave me the foundation to what seems like an endless array of tools in both the creative and tech space so that I would be able to continue learning them even after graduation. Which is exactly what I did; I kept learning and kept going onward to continued education and to a very fulfilling career as a creative.

Shortly after graduating the CTE program, I ventured out to Los Angeles to continue to explore and utilize my creative skill set. I took a couple more college classes all the while developing my online portfolio showcasing the skills I learned at CTE and soon I was invited to work for the city of Los Angeles as a designer and developer and they made a reference to what was seen in my portfolio -- which is a direct representation of what I learned while in the CAWD program. I have been working for the city of Los Angeles for the past 10 years using the same tools I was given access to while at CTE. More specifically, I am working for the largest county elections office in the U.S: The Los Angeles County Registrar-Recorder/County Clerk. While, there, I get to work on many election-critical applications from the County's website, to native Android apps that scan ballots boxes that come in on election night and a web application that allows voters to locate their nearest vote center. I've also had the privilege of working on billboards seen from major LA freeways and other deliverables that are seen by the many residents of Los Angeles every day.

The work itself is very exciting but it is also the empowerment I received while at CTE that still sits with me every day; a level of empowerment that enables me to turn around and provide a product or a service to others in an attempt to offer empowerment myself.

I'm working on a couple business ventures, one being a nonprofit I started a few years ago that focuses on offering educational opportunities and empowerment for youth growing up in adverse communities here in LA. So because of the empowerment I received in high school, at CTE, I am turning around and trying to offer the same tools and resources I was once provided access to and for students that might otherwise be without.

I'm also working on building a social enterprise which is a business that's in business strictly to create a positive social impact. I want to use creativity whether in the design space or tech space to find solutions to the systems that help run our planet all for the hopes of bettering our world and its communities.

So CTE for me, was worthwhile because:

- It empowered me to explore options in the creative space and to be able to follow my dreams as a creative individual which enabled me to continue to learn the best way that my brain does learn; hands-on, first hand experiences
- It empowered me to continue building upon what I already learned and apply it to very real-world applications that people and communities can benefit from
- It was the level of empowerment I received that influenced me to build a nonprofit and a social enterprise that focuses on creating solutions and opportunities of empowerment for our communities while utilizing the creative skill set I developed while at CTE
- Most importantly, it empowered me to be the person I am today which I feel is the best version of myself

I strongly feel that if those two years at CTE did not happen for me, then I would not have transformed into the individual I am and I would not have had the opportunities I have been given. All the work I have been a part of and the projects I have had the pleasure of creating, all the

people I have tried to empower or help as well are a direct result of my being empowered through the CTE program at Essex High School.

With these opportunities that we are given, we can really build something that matters for the people around us all the while exploring our many, many interests. It has been a very exciting journey and though it has been a while since I was sitting in that classroom for CAWD, my memories are still very vivid because that's where it all started. I never even wanted to leave.

### **Why It Was Hard to Leave**

I feel like most students can't wait to graduate and get out of high school but for me, it was actually the opposite. I went from struggling in school, not having fun with it, to being provided a new and exciting opportunity with CTE and the CAWD program and so when it was time to graduate and move on, I felt really quite sad about it. Just the thought of leaving something like that behind; something that had a profound impact on myself as an individual in multiple ways, made it that much more difficult to walk away. However, knowing that I was given a skill set that helped prepare me going forward onto continued education and onto a career I love was a very positive note to leave on.

### **For Any Students Considering Attending CTE**

I would strongly suggest you at least check it out, take a tour of the place, meet some of the teachers and attend the open house. Though I know everyone's story is different and we have varying interests, I think we all deserve and want the opportunity to further explore those interests. The CTE and the CAWD program for me was a great adventure and as I am here -- again -- 16 years later, I am still applying what I learned there out in the industry on some very real-world projects; projects that are benefiting the lives of others. I think we all deserve the opportunity to explore ourselves, to be empowered, to be prepared for the world outside of high school and beyond and CTE is the perfect place to get started.