

My Journey at and After The Vanguard School

By Joshua Ross

I am Joshua Ross, a proud alumnus of The Vanguard School. During my 11-year journey at Vanguard, I faced many trials and triumphs. I am extremely happy to share my story.

I joined Vanguard in first grade after struggling in public school. I often found myself overwhelmed by the noise, movement, and constant activity in that setting. Looking back, I realize that my sensitivity to stimuli made it difficult to focus and stay out of trouble. To this day, I prefer smaller crowds of no more than ten people.

My first-grade teachers, Mrs. Seponski and Mrs. Piper, were instrumental in helping me develop strategies to manage these challenges, such as using headphones to reduce noise and fidget toys to stay focused. I still remember them fondly, especially how they cried with pride during our holiday singing assembly. They were amazing teachers, and I was sad when they moved on to different positions.

Elementary school was a time of growth, with teachers who took pride in their students and helped us reach our potential. However, middle school was a different challenge. I had difficulty getting to know myself as a person as most young people do during this time. It was a difficult time, but that's okay! I persevered with the support of my teachers and family, and I firmly believe that overcoming those challenges made me stronger. I believe that the challenges I faced as a kid helped me develop the tools I need to navigate life today. Thank you, Vanguard!

I would like to take a moment to thank the timeout staff for their efforts in calming me down. To this day I am so appreciative of all that you did to help give me the tools to grow and calm myself down of my own volition. A special thanks to Mr. Cucchi (blessed be his memory) who could tell when I was about to be agitated and he could intervene. I would also like to thank Mrs. Carlson who dealt with me the same way in high school.

The teacher who had the greatest impact on me was Mr. Kramer (G-d bless his memory). Anyone who met him would agree—there was no one else like Mr. Kramer. His personality was unique, but at heart, he was a big kid who truly understood us. He never judged, belittled, or ostracized me, even when I acted out. Instead, he encouraged me to challenge myself academically and socially. He allowed us to learn through experience, keeping a watchful eye on our interactions while giving us the space to grow. If we got too rowdy, he'd step in and guide us in the right direction.

During summer camp at Vanguard, I had some of my best experiences. Under the guidance of Holly Zipperer, we went on incredible trips like kayaking and canoeing in Virginia. We also worked on hands-on projects, using belt sanders and electric saws to build wooden chairs. I still have mine, and after 12 years, it's in better shape than most store-bought furniture! While I loved these activities, the best part was experiencing them with friends.

I remember high school and the Transition Center most fondly, even though those years brought some of my biggest challenges. Despite everything, I am forever grateful to the Vanguard staff for standing by me. High school was a time of learning and self-discovery, and I want to thank my teachers for helping me think critically and explore new ideas. I once described my journey like this: “If Mr. Kramer took us in rough, then Mrs. Hight, Wilson, Rettig, and Swaney polished us, and Dennis Smith from the Vanguard Transition Center sent us into the real world ready to shine.” Thank you all for everything you did for us!

I left Vanguard during a difficult time, but that’s okay! It made me stronger, and I am thriving now. I believe everything happens for a reason. At Vanguard, I gained coping skills, self-awareness, and a deeper understanding of my strengths and sensitivities. Without that foundation, I wouldn’t have been prepared for the journey ahead.

After Vanguard, I completed high school at The Anderson School, run by the Montgomery County Intermediate Unit. From there, I earned a full scholarship to Montgomery County Community College, where I graduated summa cum laude with an associate degree in liberal arts. It may have taken me seven years, but I did it! The note-taking skills I learned from Mr. Smith at the Transition Center were invaluable, and I know Mrs. Rettig would be proud—I finished my college history class with a 104% average, getting every question right, including the bonus ones! While attending college, I also balanced part-time work and learned to manage my schedule efficiently.

Since leaving Vanguard, I have held several jobs, but none have been as fulfilling as my current role at a retirement community, where I have worked for the past two years. I love engaging with the residents, and I’m on a first-name basis with many of them. This fall, I plan to return to college to study geriatrics or another medical science. On weekends, I also work at a farm and actively participate in my local synagogue.

I now live independently where I work, pay taxes, shop for groceries, and vote in elections. I also recently earned my driver’s license after working on it for four years! I take pride in being a fully independent and contributing member of my community. My interests include history, gardening, rock and fossil hunting, video gaming, and traveling with my family. My love for history started young and was further nurtured by my Vanguard teachers, who encouraged me to explore new topics.

Looking back, I am incredibly grateful for the teachers who supported me every step of the way. They never judged me, and I often think about how their guidance prepared me for the future. Mr. Dennis Smith once told me, “You have a path. It may not be short, and it may not be easy, but you have a path.” Those words still inspire me today.

If I could give advice to the younger generation—or my younger self—it would be this: Don’t be too hard on yourself. Being overly critical accomplishes nothing and only creates more stress for tomorrow. With time and maturity, the sky is truly the limit. The possibilities for growth are endless, and if you put your mind to it, great things can happen! And to anyone facing challenges, I say, Have hope. With time, hard work, and perseverance, you can overcome obstacles and come out even stronger.

To end on a cheerful note: In my opinion, being neurodivergent just enhances the flavor of being 'Josh.' As Dr. Seuss once said, 'Why fit in when you were born to stand out?'