

A man with short dark hair, wearing a white polo shirt and khaki pants, stands outdoors in front of a building with orange and red architectural elements. He is smiling slightly and looking towards the camera. A lanyard with a small tag hangs around his neck. The background is slightly blurred, showing greenery and a white building.

PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES HAVE GREAT CAPABILITIES

Perspective from Josh Brown

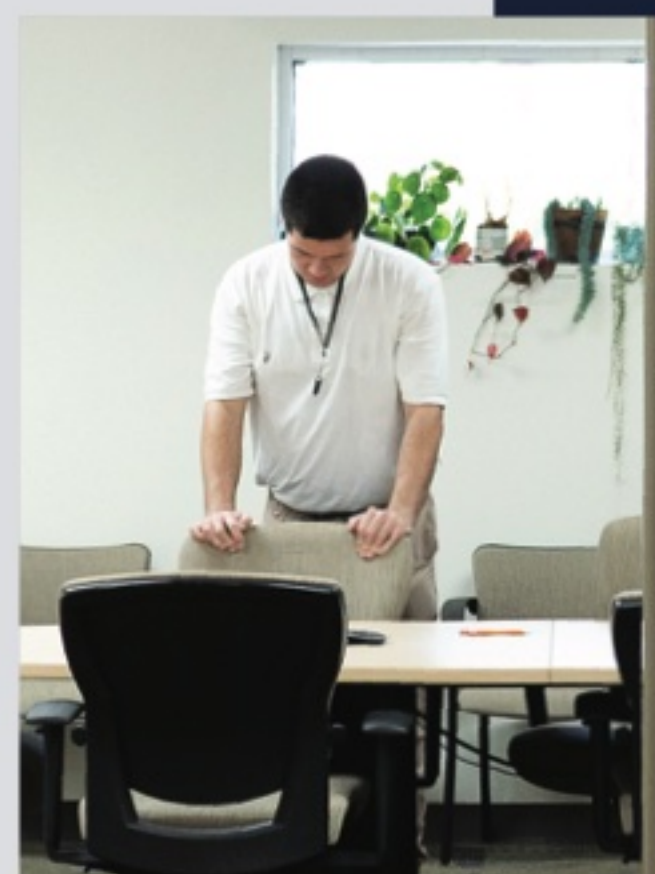
Just a few hundred feet beyond the beautiful town of Pendleton sits an unassuming, one-story building with bright orange awnings. This is Tetramer, a company dedicated to developing market-driven materials and transitioning those materials from the lab to the marketplace. To create such advanced technologies, the company uses many highly toxic chemicals; thus, they require responsible and sober-minded employees. In 2021, Tetramer hired an intern from the ClemsonLIFE program to help with small tasks around the office and lab spaces. That young man proved to be just the right fit for the company; today he greets all visitors to Tetramer in his role as office assistant. Meet Josh Brown.

Thoughtful, polite, and caring, Josh has impeccable manners. Despite being forthright, he is open-minded and loves to serve others. Josh also has autism. But “the Brown 4” (the collective nickname claimed by parents Boyd and Lisa, son Josh, and daughter Lauren) emphasize that “He’s Josh first, autism is just one piece of who he is.”

With his wide range of interests, Josh’s life is made up of many different pieces. For instance, Josh is incredibly curious. When he asks a question about how things work, he follows up with research, making him an expert on everything from movies to technology. Josh is also an accomplished vocalist who has performed the National Anthem at various events (including the Special Olympics) and enjoys singing karaoke at local restaurants.

While autism does not define Josh, it does add complications to his life. Josh worries about germs, and he gets frustrated when things don’t work the way they are supposed to. Some social settings can make him feel uncomfortable, especially when he doesn’t know what to expect. Since these challenges can impact learning opportunities, the Brown 4 had their eyes on the ClemsonLIFE program from the time Josh was in elementary school. Even though there was a similar program closer to home in Myrtle Beach, Boyd explains, “We knew way ahead of time that ClemsonLIFE was the place for Josh - we prayed about this place. This is what God wanted for us.”

However, when the time came to apply, Josh’s grandfather had just passed away and he was distracted by that loss. In the end, he was not accepted that year. But the Brown 4 weren’t overly concerned because they knew Josh wouldn’t give up: “He has an attitude of see what I’m going to do next!” After being rejected, Josh worked hard to prepare for the next year’s application process, studying to earn his driver’s permit and getting a job while he waited. When the interview came around again, Josh was ready to impress and earned an invitation to the ClemsonLIFE program.



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Despite all his preparations, Josh struggled during his first two years in ClemsonLIFE. “The LIFE program has been incredible for Josh,” Lisa shares, “but with all the high moments, there have been some low moments too.” Adjusting to ClemsonLIFE was hard. Josh had to work through the challenges of being independent, which required him to let go of some of the habits to which had grown accustomed while living at home with his family. Lauren remembers Josh’s struggle between budgeting and his love for frozen pizza. “Josh is a picky eater, but he really enjoys frozen pizza. Things got super rocky when he had to learn how to budget and frozen pizzas were just too expensive.”

Then there was the time when he refused to cross the street because the “walking man” signal was broken. The ClemsonLIFE staff, understanding his dilemma, reached out to the mayor to resolve that issue. Social situations

presented another challenge. The LIFE program offers numerous social opportunities for its students, but Josh wasn’t always interested. He struggled with gatherings like game night; if he didn’t know what to expect, he simply didn’t want to go. The Brown 4 worked closely with the ClemsonLIFE team to navigate these difficult moments. “We collaborated to make plans to help Josh be his personal best. Sometimes it worked, and sometimes it didn’t,” Lisa recalls with a playful shrug.

One particularly anxious moment stands out for Josh’s parents: “One time we were so worried about the upcoming ClemsonLIFE visit with Dabo Swinney. At first, Josh wasn’t going to attend, but then he made the decision to go to the event. We were worried something could go wrong. And then, we got a Facetime call from an 864 number. We answered it with so much anxiety. Instead of bad news, it was Dabo Swinney and Josh just hanging out together



Through support, instruction, and nurturing from the ClemsonLIFE program, Josh received a reliable framework that has made it possible to step out of his comfort zone and into his future. He continues to blossom in all areas of his life.

and laughing! We talked to them for almost ten minutes. It was an incredible surprise."

A real transition took place around the end of Josh's sophomore year. Unexpectedly, he began to make big advances. Boyd recalls with a sense of wonder, "He just blossomed!" Like a seed in a hard shell, Josh had arrived at Clemson comfortable in his protective covering and hesitant to step outside of it. But the ClemsonLIFE program helped him grow and overcome his fears. Instead of soil, water, and sunshine they supplied support, instruction, and nurturing: a reliable framework that made it possible for Josh to step outside his comfort zone into his future.

This transformation came just in time. As Josh entered his junior year, Tetramer owners Jeff and Michelle DiMaio, both Clemson University graduates, decided to hire an intern from the ClemsonLIFE program. Michelle, now the CEO

of Tetramer, recalls, "We had talked about it for years - we just needed to be sure we could find someone who would be the right fit for our company - they needed to be able to work with a certain level of autonomy, and we wanted to find a fit that would be mutually beneficial."

The DiMaios worked with the ClemsonLIFE team to identify the right candidate, and, in the end, Josh was hired. Of all the students, he was the best fit for the high-tech company. Even still, the transition was bumpy at the beginning. "Josh was apprehensive about the walk from the bus stop to the office. At first, we would send team members out to help him each day, but that soon became overwhelming," Michelle recalls.

Fortunately, ClemsonLIFE proved to be an incredible resource and partner. They sent a Clemson graduate student to work with Josh on how to walk safely to the office,



and they practiced it together. She also worked with the Tetramer team to help them communicate more directly with Josh. While the company had tried to offer welcoming flexibility, they discovered that Josh actually needed really clear and precise instruction. And the changes worked – Josh progressed from intern to part-time Office Assistant; he even has his own business cards now! Josh receives annual performance reviews where he collects feedback from his manager, discusses expectations, and sets growth goals for the coming year. Just like other employees, Josh is eligible for (and has received) annual raises based on his performance.

Josh's contributions at Tetramer benefit the entire team. He handles sweeping and

vacuuming, keeps surfaces clean (including the windows that look into the laboratories where high-tech materials are created), walks the grounds to ensure there's no trash on the premises, helps organize storage closets, and prepares and distributes the afternoon popcorn. While popcorn distribution might seem like a minor task, Michelle has noticed a significant increase in conversation and sense of community in the office since Josh took over this role - remarkable considering that the office is full of scientists, who are typically highly introverted people.

This represents exactly the kind of mutual benefit the DiMaio's sought when they first hired Josh. They wanted him to gain from the experience of working at Tetramer while also helping their staff grow. As it turns out, in his role as greeter, Josh reaches an even broader audience, including global leaders and CEOs from around the world who visit Tetramer throughout the year. "They notice Josh, and 100 times out of 100, our guests are thrilled to meet him," says Michelle.

"People with disabilities have great capabilities," states Josh. And he's right. Individuals with these capabilities often just need the right environment to blossom so that they can go on to enrich every life they touch. The ClemsonLIFE team specializes in discovering the perfect environments and preparing their students to flourish, and their employer partners play a significant role in the process. Once a hesitant young man afraid to cross without a walking signal, Josh is now a confident professional who greets international business leaders. His experience shows that with the right support, nurturing, and opportunities, remarkable growth can happen. Josh hasn't just found his place in the world—by unleashing his capabilities he has made the world around him a brighter place.

COMPLIMENTARY

THE Shepherd

PEOPLE & PLACES IN CLEMSON



FALL & WINTER 2025