



URBAN AUTISM SOLUTIONS  
**WEST SIDE**  
TRANSITION ACADEMY



## THE NEED

Young adults with autism and related challenges age out of school the year they turn 22, losing their specialized school-based programs and services. Many students and parents liken this abrupt ending of services to 'falling off a cliff. To counter this, in the fall of 2019, UAS, in partnership with Chicago Public Schools, created the UAS West Side Transition Academy. Here, transition-aged learners receive complementary services and programs to help them successfully transition to adulthood.

### JAN. 2020 TO DEC. 2021, THE ACADEMY PROVIDED



**218** hours of communication support



**300** hours of social-emotional learning



**77** hours of job shadows, resume and interview skills training

## THE SOLUTION

Designed for transition-aged West Side Chicago public high school students (16 - 22 years old) with autism and related challenges, the UAS West Side Transition Academy provides:

- Community-based instruction, including using public transportation to navigate and explore the city and access public resources
- Speech-language therapy, occupational therapy and social services delivered by licensed clinicians and graduate students
- Job shadows and internships
- Staff to help job-ready students find and keep jobs
- Participation in community-based model businesses including our dog walking/bathing service and neighborhood beautification project

With guidance from our team, our participants learn to engage with the community, utilize neighborhood resources, prepare for employment, and achieve their personal goals.



The Academy launched a pilot program in the fall of 2019 with 24 students. By the spring, the program more than doubled. At the close of the 2020-2021 school year, it reached its capacity, providing services to 94 students. The Academy continues to expand annually and currently serves five West Side Chicago Public High Schools.





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## SUCCESS STORY

Elvis is a student at the Ray Graham Training Center, a Chicago public high school, and works at the Walmart Neighborhood Market at the corner of Cermak and Western.

“My first day was on New Year’s Eve, 2020. It was a Friday and there weren’t a lot of people at the store that day,” Elvis remembers. He works at the store four to five days a week and performs general maintenance, stocks shelves and translates for customers who speak Spanish.

Elvis got his job at Walmart Neighborhood Market through his connection with the Urban Autism Solutions West Side Transition Academy. The Academy provides services that complement those offered at Chicago Public Schools for young adults with autism and related challenges. These services may not be available in the intensity and duration needed by some students at their schools.

Students come to the Academy to receive speech and language and occupational therapy, meet with social workers as needed, and participate in community integration activities. For students who are job-ready, such as Elvis, the Academy staff works intensely with each candidate to prepare them for job interviews and work life. Once a student becomes employed, they receive on-the-job training and support from the UAS team.

Elvis started coming to the Academy in 2020 (the Academy operated entirely online in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic) and participated in online communication and social-emotional skills development sessions, job-readiness training, resume and interviewing workshops and several virtual job shadows. Once it was clear that Elvis was an excellent candidate to work in competitive employment, he and his parents spent time meeting with the Urban Autism Solutions staff to talk about next steps.

Mike Tracy, co-founder of Urban Autism Solutions and community outreach manager, knew how badly Elvis wanted to work at Walmart Neighborhood Market. Elvis told Mike working at that Walmart was his dream job, especially since it’s close to his home and he can easily take public transportation to get there.

“Mike spoke with the manager at Walmart and told him about me, helped me with the application, and came with me to training every day for a couple of weeks,” said Elvis.

Mike and his team help students with everything from resume preparation and interviewing to getting a state ID and bank account set up for direct deposits once they get the job.

Once a student secures a job, the UAS team shifts into employment coaching mode, going with the new employee to orientation, helping fill out any additional paperwork and ensuring that any problems are identified and addressed. In the following weeks and months, Mike and his team continue to check in with the employer, student and parents as needed to ensure success.

“One of the keys to success is trying to find students jobs at stores they are interested in working at and which are located close to home or school, so that it’s easy for them to get there,” Mike said.

Elvis has done so well at work that his employer has recently increased his hours.