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Photo by Jordan Tomberlin

Nicky Bibbey works at his new loom.

Nicky Bibbey's new loom is a gift from Manteo students

By JORDAN TOMBERLIN

When 19-year-old Nicky Bibbey, a Hatteras resident who was diagnosed with high-functioning autism at age 3, graduated from high school last year, his immediate future was pretty uncertain.

The world can be a difficult place for autistic individuals, and though Nicky had developed many

valuable skills during his time at Cape Hatteras Secondary School of Coastal Studies—he’s a math and computer whiz, as well as an accomplished weaver—it remained unclear how, exactly, he would be able to use those skills to make a life for himself.

So, when the faculty sponsor, parent supporters, and dedicated students of Manteo Middle School’s Technology Students Association club piled into Nicky’s house on Jan. 31 and installed the brand-new, hand-crafted loom they built especially for him, they gave Nicky much more than a piece of equipment. They gave him amazing opportunity.

And it couldn’t have come at a better time.

Nicky’s mother, Analee Bibbey, knew that the shift from high school to “the real world” was going to be a challenge, so she started researching options that would help bridge the gap and facilitate Nicky’s adjustment to his new life.



Photo by Jordan Tomberlin

Manteo Middle School students made Nicky a stool to go with the loom and signed their names on it.

Long before Nicky graduated, Analee began applying for Social Security services that would provide Nicky, who has had an assistant all his life, with a mentor—someone who could keep him engaged in a wide range of activities and help him find appropriate work opportunities.

She also started thinking about getting Nicky a loom.

Nicky, who has been weaving since one of his assistants introduced him to the craft about four years ago, had been using a loom that the Outer Banks Hotline had donated to the school.

His work was given to Endless Possibilities, a shop in downtown Manteo, where it was fashioned into everything from rugs to purses to shoes. Nicky clearly had a talent for the art. His pieces were known for their tight, sturdy weave, and items made from his work became very popular.

Since Nicky wouldn’t have access to the loom after he graduated, Analee started talking to the folks at Hotline and Endless Possibilities, trying to get information on buying one, and Elaine

Whitaker, the career development counselor at the school, also joined the search, hoping to find someone that might be willing to donate a loom.

Unfortunately their loom quest fizzled out. “Nothing ever came of it,” Analee said, “except that we put a bug in their ear that we were looking for a loom.”

More and more time passed after Nicky’s graduation, and his family’s concerns and frustrations mounted.

They hadn’t received any information about the services they had applied for, and they hadn’t been able to secure a loom.

Some aspects of Nicky’s routine remained the same—Gingerbread House pizza on Friday nights, the Library on Saturday mornings, and church on Sundays—and he always has the movies he loves, but without being in school, without having an assistant or a mentor, and without access to a loom, Nicky couldn’t really do much else, and that deeply concerned Analee.

“I wanted to find something for him to do, something that would ease the transition,” she explained, ultimately concluding, “I want him to have a life, you know?”



Photo by Jordan Tomberlin

Some of Nicky's woven items in bright colors.

Then one day, out of the blue, Analee got phone call from someone asking if she would be interested in a loom.

The answer, of course, was a very enthusiastic “yes.”

The phone call came from Dee Davis, a parent supporter of the Technology Students Association club at Manteo Middle School. The club needed to complete a project for their construction challenge. It had to be community-oriented, and, whatever they chose to build, the majority of the work had to be done by the students.

Dee had gotten the idea to build a loom after visiting Endless Possibilities one afternoon. Her original plan was to have the students construct a loom that they could then donate to Endless Possibilities.

But when she presented the idea, Robin Suttle of Endless Possibilities told Dee that they didn't have the space to support another loom, but that if she was interested, there was a family in Hatteras looking for a loom for their autistic son.

Dee loved the idea, and after contacting Analee, she and her husband Bruce, also a TSA parent supporter and a carpenter by trade, borrowed an old loom from the Hotline attic. They took it home, and after studying how it was made, researching different types of looms, and speaking with experts on the topic, they believed they would be able to build one.

The last thing they needed to do before starting the project was to meet Nicky.

Analee took Nicky to meet them and said that as soon as he walked in, Nicky went straight to the loom and started using it. That sealed the deal.

The TSA club secured a \$500 grant from the Dare County Arts Council, funded by the Grassroots Arts Program of the North Carolina Arts Council, and on Nov. 22, they went to work on the project, toiling on the weekends, through their Thanksgiving, Christmas, and New Year's holidays, in a workshop in Manns Harbor, donated to them by Gary Larson of Manns Harbor Storage.



Courtesy Photo

Students in Manteo Middle School's Technology Students Association construct a loom for Nicky Bibbey of Hatteras village.

All of the raw materials that the students needed to complete the project were either donated or heavily discounted and contributions came in from as far away as New Hampshire and as nearby as the Manteo Ace Hardware store.

The students were not allowed to use power tools, so Bruce did all the cutting, but other than that, the seven middle school students built Nicky's loom. They did all the sanding, all the varnishing, and ultimately put the loom together.

When they learned that the loom needed a warping board, Dee contacted local craftsman Inger Seitz. The Southern Shores resident and Finland native started the Fiber Guild of the Outer Banks and is a world-renowned, award-winning fiber artist.

Seitz not only volunteered her expertise, personally assembling Nicky's warp reel when the loom was delivered that Saturday morning, she also gave Nicky a box of twine and a threading tool that her grandfather had made in Finland.

"The entire project has been like that," Dee said. "It's really brought a lot of people together."

On Jan. 24, after 17 days of hard work, the loom was finally finished and ready to go. They had even made Nicky a stool that listed all the donors and was signed by all the students who brought the loom to fruition.

The loom was taken apart and loaded up, and Dee and Bruce drove down to the Bibbeys' house on Friday morning, Jan. 30, so that they could reassemble the loom in the Bibbeys' home office—"Tom's room," as Nicky calls it—before the club arrived the next morning.

After Seitz finished warping the loom, it was ready for Nicky to use, and Hotline had sent numerous bags of pre-cut fabric, in the bright colors that Nicky loves, so that he could start weaving right away.

"It was a lot of fun, and it was really a good thing," Dee said of the project, which the TSA club will present when they attend the state convention in March and the national convention in June.

As proud as the students are of their accomplishment, and as happy as Nicky is with his gift, there is probably no one more excited about the loom than Analee.

"It's great," she beamed. "You never know where this could take him."