



SUCCESSSTORY



Names and photos have been changed to protect the identity and provacy of the children involved.

Allesia's Story Count Me In | Lanterman Highschool

Year One: 2011-2012

Watching students in the hallways or outside on the sport field at Lanterman High School you wouldn't notice Allesia among the many students in their hoodies. With her dark hair, sleepy eyes and medium build, the only thing that might draw your attention to Allesia was her high-pitched, sometimes "sing-songish" voice, along with her tendency to laugh aloud at times that seemed surprising to others.

Looking around at the students in her classroom, Allesia would likely be seen working alone quietly at her desk. However, she had a tendency to become animated and jovial on her own schedule. At Lanterman, her "special needs" place her somewhere along the Autism Spectrum Disorder. Described as "moody" by her teachers, some might have said that 13-yr.-old Allesia had an "attitude."

At the start of school in September 2011, Allesia found

herself enrolled in Lanterman's **Count Me In** program. She was one of a small group of 10 students, and this program was a new experience for all of them. However, the program's instructor recognized Allesia as a special challenge pretty quickly. Students participating in **Count Me In** must, among other things, learn to follow his direction and be attentive to the activities at hand. Respect is central to the success of each student and to the cohesion of the ensemble itself.

Not surprisingly, the program's twice-weekly sessions seriously challenged Allesia's attitudinal independence, not to mention her overall attitude. She would be a challenge!

Like most of the students in her group, four months of activity and engagement had helped Allesia to begin to understand and accept her responsibilities in the program. By January 2012, her mother reported that Allesia's insecurity and "bad behavior" had begun to improve. Her classroom teacher had noticed similar changes, claiming that Allesia was "not as shy" as she was at the start of the year, and, more importantly, that she had "improved her turn taking skills" within her regular classroom. The **Count Me In** instructor worked diligently with everyone in the group, especially Allesia, to understand that the program required not only active individual participation in curricular exercises but active attention to what others in the group were doing. Everyone had to pay attention to everyone else's efforts, especially during group activities. Slowly, according to the program instructor's January report, Allesia was beginning to respond to these expectations.

Apparently, these same sorts of changes in Allesia's behavior were apparent outside of school as well. Reflecting on that first semester of **Count Me In**, her mother observed that Allesia had become "more enthusiastic, more active and wants to go to school more," adding: "I believe that there is a big difference in my daughter's life... from the last school [year] until now" [trans.]. Was this "big difference" directly attributable to Allesia's participation in **Count Me In**? Perhaps to some extent, or in some small but important way, it was. Only time would tell.

By that school year's end (June 2012) it had become clear to the program instructor that, at least during the time he spent with her in the twice-weekly **Count Me In** sessions, Allesia's behavior had improved noticeably since their first meeting the previous September. More importantly, perhaps, her classroom teacher recognized, now, that Allesia was "more confident and has improved in her ability to adapt to changes in routine." He went on to note that by year's end, she had become "much more aware socially and interacts much more positively with her peers," and that she was "having fun with music."

Allesia's mother, too, saw many of these same changes in her daughter during the school year that seemed, from a mother's perspective, at least partially attributable to Allesia's attendance in the **Count Me In** program.

"SHE LIKES TO SING AND DANCE," HER MOM WROTE, ADDING: "MY DAUGHTER LIKES TO GO TO SCHOOL. SHE SEEMS HAPPIER AND MORE ENTHUSIASTIC"

Allesia's mom was impressed enough with **Count Me In** that she enrolled Allesia for a second year.

Year Two: 2012-2013

Allesia's second year in the **Count Me In** program has apparently continued to promote her positive growth pattern and attitude adjustment, albeit along a less dramatic curve. Recall that, according to those who offered their initial perceptions (her classroom teacher, her mother, and the program instructor), Allesia began the program in fall 2011 as a somewhat moody "loner" who didn't care all that much for school and had a habit of exhibiting her emotions at times that seemed inappropriate. Her first year in the program seemed, according to the perceptions of others, to have helped Allesia focus, become more of a team player and, apparently, find some musical value in attending the **Count Me In** sessions (and, for that matter, school, itself).

Allesia began her second year in the program in another small group of 10 students, several of whom she knew from the previous year. According to the program's instructor, she settled in nicely. At the program's midpoint (January 2013), her classroom teacher was able to report that Allesia was more readily following directions, better able to focus and control her occasional outbursts and "working and cooperating better with peers." He added that after a year and a half, he believed that her membership in the **Count Me In** program was helping Allesia to learn "about working with a group, waiting her turn and following directions" — all of which are crucial to any teacher working within any classroom.

By the mid-point of her second year in the program, the **Count Me In**

instructor had similar impressions from his twice-weekly sessions with Allesia, noting not only her willingness to be a “team player” but a decrease in her mood swings as well. These impressions seem to reinforce others’ perceptions that Allesia had indeed managed to retain the positive changes in her behaviors acquired during her first year in the program. Most importantly, from the out-of-school vantage point, her mother noted that Allesia had “improved on many things” [trans.], including an ability to get along better with others. Overall, then, we can see that Allesia’s participation in **Count Me In** continued to help her re-shape her attitudes toward others and, relatedly, toward her expectations and experiences of school in general.

By the end of her second year in the program Allesia is, at the age of 15, anything but a “social butterfly.” Like the parents of other students engaged in **Count Me In**, Allesia’s mother notes that her daughter

“IS MORE COMFORTABLE AND PARTICIPATES MORE” IN SOCIAL SETTINGS.”

And Allesia’s classroom teacher agrees, echoing a theme identified by most teachers/aides with students in the program that Allesia “seems more at ease with group participation” in the regular classroom. However, the program’s instructor – who works

with her twice weekly – suspects that Allesia’s overall comfort and participation levels within the **Count Me In** group may have plateaued. The best he can muster at year’s end is to note that her general demeanor within the group is “about the same” as he judged it in January (which was positive, to be sure).

This notion of reaching a plateau, or “flat-lining,” is not meant to be negative in any sense. After all, for students like Allesia, who began **Count Me In** as something just short of anti-social, reaching a point where she can better attend to her parents and teachers and, at least, get along with her peers is worthy of note and celebration. One of the program’s goals is to assist students in their ability to note and respond appropriately to others, and Allesia seems to have moved successfully toward this goal during her time with the **Count Me In** sessions. At the end of Year 2, her classroom teacher agreed with the chorus of other teachers with students in the program that Allesia “pays more attention to directions” – something her mom (like most other parents with kids in the program) supports, albeit cautiously, when she says that Allesia “is a little more focused” [trans.] than she was in January. Yet her program instructor wasn’t quite able to find mom’s tentative optimism, noting (again), that with regard to her overall advancement in learning and development, Allesia seemed to him to be “about the same” as he scored it in January.

Count Me In attempts to teach students rudimentary musical terminology, concepts and skills, and Allesia continued to develop along these lines during her second year in the program. Her mom didn’t note any

such “musical” improvements at year’s end, though her classroom teacher echoed the sentiments of other teachers whose students participate in the program, saying that Allesia “tried hard to follow patterns” (which are fundamental to a great deal of academic learning). Patterns are among the central components of the **Count Me In** program, and are found in a host of its exercises. One of these – “lateral movement” – teaches students to combine reading visual symbols (quarter notes with the designations LLRR, or LRLR) with the ability to correctly say and play those notes using their left (L) and right (R) hands. For many students with one sort of learning challenge or another, this exercise in lateral movement is quite challenging, requiring not only visual/verbal/motor coordination, but also focus and attention levels taken for granted by most others. And it is here, in the challenge of mastering “lateral movement,” that the program’s instructor saw noteworthy improvement in Allesia by the end of Year 2.

Mastering individual learning challenges like the “lateral movement” exercises noted above doesn’t necessarily gain friends or influence peers. So while Allesia appeared to be less resistant to collective engagements (“Seems to like being in a group” wrote her classroom teacher, and “more comfortable participating with others” [trans.] wrote her mother), the **Count Me In** instructor was “not sure” about this change in Allesia’s demeanor after two years of sessions with her. It’s worth repeating, here, that these impressions come at the end of Year 2 of the program; in other words, while everyone agrees that Allesia has made huge gains in her ability to socially interact since her entry into the program in September

2011, the extent to which these gains continue to present themselves during the latter half of her second year may have leveled off. Nonetheless, the program instructor was able to acknowledge that by Year 2's end, Allesia had indeed "improved [her] social skills" in his estimation, and her classroom teacher wrote that she was definitely "more aware of participating in a GROUP" (teacher's

emphasis). The last word belongs to Allesia's mom, who wrote: "I, as her mother, have seen a huge change in my daughter..." [trans.] as a result of participating in *Count Me In*, Lanterman.

Head down. Almost always with her head down unless needing to look up for instructions, Allesia performs enthusiastically during the project's end-of-year concert in June 2013. And during those 30

minutes she remains intensely attuned to the task-at-hand: what she is expected to play, when, and the source of her cues. She's smiling a bit more now, though not necessarily for the camera (or other, physically present observers). She still wears a hoodie, but it doesn't cover her head. She's focused. Busy. She's got a job to do!