

## Living his best life

Jake Johnson had planned to enter medical school upon graduation from Emory University and become a psychiatrist. However, after a trip to Europe during his junior year, he was no longer certain about his future.

Jake contacted his vocational rehabilitation counselor at the South Carolina Commission for the Blind (SCCB) and expressed his desire to be involved in the medical field and with helping others. But he also said that he was frustrated because he didn't know how he might do this. Jake and his counselor researched many types of medical careers available for a person who is legally blind, but none of the positions really interested him.



Jake was born with ocular albinism and has lived his entire life as a person who is legally blind. Ocular albinism is a genetic condition that reduces the pigmentation of the iris (the colored part of the eye) and the retina, the light-sensitive tissue at the back of the eye. It affects depth perception and how sharp or blurry things appear.

Jake was strongly encouraged by his family (both parents are medical professionals) to pursue his interests and goals and not let his vision issues be a barrier to achieving those.

As a young adult, Jake came to SCCB and received services that helped him excel in high school and prepare for college. Some of the services Jake received included counseling and guidance, orientation and mobility training, and a low vision assessment. He also received several types of assistive technology devices, including a portable CCTV to connect to a laptop, a monocular (a "mini telescope" that magnifies objects at a distance), and a ruby (a handheld video magnifier).

Jake knew that post-secondary training would be the gateway to his future, even if he was unsure what that future would be. SCCB provided Jake with financial assistance for tuition, books, and assistive technology while he attended Emory University, where he studied Biology and Classical Civilizations and graduated in 2018 with degrees in both subjects.

After Jake became unsure about his employment goal, he discovered a new, unexpected path. One that would lead to exciting career opportunities. Jake read an article that described a full-scale emergency management exercise that Emory University had completed. Intrigued by this, he pursued an internship with the University's Office of Critical Event Preparedness and Response and then another internship with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. These experiences were a turning point for him.



# South Carolina Commission for the Blind

After graduation, Jake interned with the Homeland Security and Emergency Management Agency, working on projects during an Emergency Operations Center (EOC) activation. Following this, he attended the Georgia Institute of Emergency Medical Services (EMS) and completed training to enter the National Registry of Advanced Emergency Medical Technicians.

“The internships helped Jake confirm his passion,” says his counselor, “and that emergency management was the career path he wanted to pursue.”

In September 2018, Jake was hired to serve as Emergency Management Coordinator for Bon Secours Mercy Health in Greenville. An SCCB employment consultant assisted him throughout the hiring process.

At Bon Secours, Jake managed the market-wide Emergency Management Program, including 400 beds across two hospitals and approximately 80 ancillary medical facilities and offices. He conducted training and exercises for all levels of staff. Jake also coordinated the response to Covid-19 through the Hospital Command Center and managed the Covid-19 Vaccination Clinic. And he completed training in Bon Secours Emerging Leaders Program.

While working full-time, Jake entered the online graduate program at Arkansas State University, earning a Master of Science in Disaster Preparedness and Emergency Management in 2022. SCCB provided tuition and other assistance as Jake completed his degree.

In addition to helping Jake and his family find other local and community resources, one of the most significant on-the-job supports that SCCB assisted with is Bioptic Driver Training.

This is a special type of driver training that helps people with low vision learn to drive using a combination of their regular eyeglasses and a small telescopic lens system that improves their distance vision. Drivers use their regular lenses most of the time and look through the telescope when they need to see more details, such as road signs, traffic lights, or potential hazards. Bioptic driving requires careful fitting of the system and extensive training. Jake was evaluated and it was determined that he could benefit from this type of training. And last year, he successfully secured his driver’s license. For people with low vision who can benefit from it, this type of training can have a profound effect on their mobility, employment, and ability to live independently.

According to his counselor, “Over the years, both Jake and his family have expressed immense gratitude for the assistance that SCCB has provided.”

Today, Jake has a new role at Bon Secours as the Protective Services Emergency Management Consultant. “I’m living my best life and enjoying myself,” he says. “I’m looking forward to my future.”