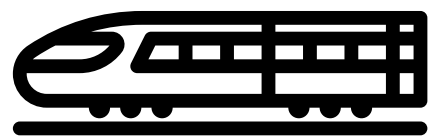




All Aboard

Empower Member Kaleb Ball is living 'a dream come true'



Empower Healthcare Solutions member Kaleb Ball of Springdale is on the right track, literally.

Ball, 25, serves as an On-board Show Conductor for the Arkansas Missouri Railroad Excursions (A&M) in Springdale.

"This is a dream come true," said Ball. "I've always loved trains," adding, "when I was young, I started riding

with my great grandfather every Saturday on the trolley in Fort Smith."

Ball, who is on the Autism Spectrum, has not let his disability derail his passion of trains. He obtained his first volunteer job at age 14 with the Fort Smith Trolley. A few years later, he came on staff of the A&M. He has no plans to go off the

rails anytime soon.

"This is the best job ever. I don't think I would want to be doing anything else," shared Ball. "I am thankful every day."

Ball is a railroad buff, with knowledge about all things trains and A&M. He can identify an A&M train just by the sound of the train's whistle.

He is always eager to share the history and stories about Coach 105 and

and 106 vintage train cars with velvet bench seating and the more premium cars 107, 108 and 109 dinner cars. In the past, Ball helped with renovation of some of the train cars.

Guests on tours will likely be greeted and helped onto the train by Ball. He will dressed in the traditional three-piece black suit and brass-badged hat. Along the tours from Springdale to Winslow and Van Buren, Ball serves as narrator. He shares the history, a few train facts, and many stories about the area. Some of his favorite tours include "Meet Santa on the Holiday Express" and the "February Love Train." The prettiest excursion, he admits, occurs during the Arkansas fall foliage.

Back at the train depot, Ball leads tours of the Arkansas Missouri Railroad Museum. He shares the history of the railroad from its beginnings to present day. He also assists with various maintenance or facility needs at the Museum.

"Kaleb is a special guy," shared Brenda Rouse, Excursion Train Operations Manager, who brought Kaleb on staff about 10 years ago. She also employees four other staff members with Autism.

"Kaleb is always willing to help," she said. "He is a super trouper."

During the Christmas holidays, Ball can be found at area schools reading the "Polar Express" book to students.

"I was invited to read to students at

my former school," he said. That was an honor."

April Patterson, Ball's Empower Care Coordinator for the last several years, praises his accomplishments. She has also helped him get on the CES Waiver .

"Kaleb is a great and ... and I am glad he is doing what he loves to do," said Patterson. "I enjoy our visits and making sure he has what he needs.

"I also learn something new about trains every time we meet," she added.

Ball's life journey has not been all "bells and whistles."

His mom died in 2014 when he was a freshman in high school. That same year, he would go to live with his mom's sister, Jerri Dwyer and her family, in Rogers, enroll at Rogers High School and was diagnosed with Autism.

"We were able to enroll Kaleb in the special education program at Rogers High School," shared Dwyer, adding, "he was not diagnosed with Autism until 2014 ... and added to the CES Waiver Waitlist."

For the next four years, each Friday, the Dwyer family would drive the 136-mile round trip from Springdale to Fort Smith so that Ball could visit his great grandfather. Each Saturday, Ball would volunteer at the Trolley, and return to Rogers on

Sunday.

"We made that drive every Friday until he graduated so that Kaleb could see his great-grandfather, ... see his dad and work on the Trolley on Saturday," shared Dwyer. "It has been sometimes hard for Kaleb and our family, ... but he so resilient and always stays positive.

"He has a servant's heart and is always happy to help people."

Dwyer expressed her appreciation to the A&M staff for allowing Ball to, "do what he loves to do." This opportunity, she said, changed Kaleb's life forever.

"Kaleb is a different person while riding on the train," shared Dwyer. "He rises to much higher achievements when he is on the train.

"On the train, his communication improves. He takes charge. He is in his element."

Ball is also an Irish dancer and is CPR certified. He is a member of the Arkansas Boston Mountain Chapter of the National Railway Historical Society. He has made various appearances in magazines in Arkansas, and was a background conductor in a 2021 movie called *Mindcage* that was filmed at his place of employment.

Soon, Ball hopes to live on his own with assistance of a Waiver provider and, of course, continue to 'keep that train a rollin.'

By Stella Prather, APR



Kaleb Ball with his supervisor Brenda Rouse (right) and Empower CC April Patterson (left).