

## Hunter Pugh

Hunter Pugh immediately starts talking about her love for coffee and asks me about my interests when we first meet at the ESP office in Watkinsville. She apologizes for her voice as she says she is slightly under the weather and then leads me to her office.

One of the ESP participants is playing on her iPad when we get there, and Hunter greets her and smiles. In many ways Hunter Pugh is a typical 22-year-old recent college grad. She's young and eager to change the world.

She was originally a Psychology major but during her junior year at the University of Alabama she realized her passion for social work. She started looking for ways to get involved in social work that summer and stumbled upon ESP.

She laughs about her sudden change of career so late in her college, but she would not change anything as ESP "make[s] [her] want to be a better person." ESP stands for Extra Special People which has year-round programs for children with disabilities.

ESP's main motto is inclusion and they ensure all children have the same opportunities regardless of abilities. ESP has a wide impact on the participants and the volunteers. Chloe Wise, an intern who has been involved with ESP since middle school, says the program is "eye-opening" and the participants make her "feel at home."

Hunter serves as the Volunteer coordinator and oversees the over 800 people interacting with the participants each year. She started out as a summer counselor two years ago and states she, "somehow got the job, because [she'd] never worked with special needs people before." She quickly fell in love the first summer and applied for a part time position after college graduation, so she could get her master's at UGA.

However, shortly after she started her boss quit and she took over his full-time position. She notes "it was a quick turnover" from summer intern to full-time employee but she loves the challenge. Her goal along is to create "a world in which a person who has typical abilities and a person with disabilities can function in the same world together."

She also hopes to spread more awareness about people with different abilities and "break the barrier people have" between the special need's community. Regarding special needs education, Hunter believes more inclusivity and greater understanding is needed.

Gena Hill, a Human Development and Family Science major and ESP intern, echoes this statement asserting, "people with special needs are capable of reaching the same type of goals as neurotypical kids but just need a different path."

Hunter is "about one-third of the way done" with her Master's in social work and hopes to continue working for ESP after graduation. She wants to focus on how to help families who cannot focus on their child's special needs because they are concerned about "keeping the lights on." She wants to show people all the joy special needs people have as it has changed not only her career path but also "changed how [she] gives grace to people" and made her



so much happier knowing people with special needs. She “strives to be like the participants as they have no filter, no wall, no fear.”

Hunter Pugh, LinkedIn



Hunter Pugh, ESP Website

