

# Earning My Success:

## *Working with the Career Visions Project*

I am sharing my experiences as a participant in the Career Visions project because I believe that employment difficulties are an often overlooked aspect of life for individuals with disabilities. I also believe that having a job – somewhere to be, something to do, a purpose – can be an important part of the recovery process.

A lot of my self-worth is tied to my ability to be useful, whether that be in an academic or career setting. My goal upon entering Career Visions was to learn job skills, increase my comfort with tasks that I would likely have to do in a job, volunteer, and ultimately land a part-time job. My participation in the Career Visions Project was a turning point for me.

When I started Career Visions, I was not comfortable looking at my resume. Jared, my career guide, and I did not look at my resume for months. Such is the beauty of a program where I determined the pace. I told him I had lost the document, half-hoping/believing it was true. The first time I reopened my resume document I cried and pondered deleting it. Looking back, my resume wasn't that dreadful. It was typical of a full-time college student who had transitioned straight from high school to college. One of the most important things about Jared was that he was non-judgmental. He was also consistently reliable and

worked so hard to aid me in my career struggles.

The more time I spent in the Career Visions Project, the more ambitious I became. What started out as a goal for part-time work morphed into desiring full-time work once school ended. Then I decided I didn't want school to end (imagine that!) and applied to graduate school. I have accomplished everything I set out to do through self-determination and the guidance of the project. I graduated college with a bachelor's degree with honors. I also started working full-time at a non-profit residential treatment center. I was accepted to graduate school and currently attend while working full-time. I have earned my success. That said, my success would not have been possible without Career Visions.

I am twenty-two years old and have had mental health problems since I was six-years old. I first began treatment when I was fourteen and have been a mental health service consumer ever since. The status of my mental health has been a significant barrier for as long as I can remember; however, I am still a very capable person. It is just harder to do some things, and for most everything I have a plan. Given appropriate accommodations, I believe I can be very successful. Career Visions taught me about making a plan to overcome barriers. I can take care of myself. I pay my rent and bills on time and with money I have earned. I get

myself to appointments on time and rarely miss a day of work. Without a job, this would not be possible.

### HELPFUL ASPECTS OF CAREER VISIONS

The dreaded revision of my resume was an integral part of my Career Visions experience, and a catalyst for my success. Prior to beginning Career Visions, I had very little knowledge of how one went about obtaining employment. I obtained my first job at eighteen as waitstaff the summer after I graduated from high school. I worked part-time for two months until I began college. During that short time, the job terrified me. I hated handling money and was afraid of not remembering orders correctly. In college, I had two part-time work study jobs that lasted less than six months each. I did not know how to request accommodations. I did not know how to advocate for myself. I was not self-determined.

In Career Visions, I learned how to be self-determined. I learned how to write a resume, respond to job postings, research careers, conduct informational interviews, make phone calls, ask for help, and take risks. I remember the first time I made a phone call to a potential employer on my own. At my request, Jared and I wrote potential scenarios and practiced them several times before I made the call. That first call was rather anticlimactic given that it ended up going to voicemail. All the same, imagined and real phone rehearsals and having as much information as possible helped me feel comfortable and prepared.

Another helpful piece of Career Visions was how Jared and I would brainstorm to overcome barriers. For example, I have trouble sleeping so we would discuss steps to take so that I would feel better rested before an interview. I am afraid of driving and that often became a barrier to success: sometimes because a potential employer would require the ability to drive a company vehicle or transport clients, and sometimes because utilizing only public transportation limited me in the locations and times I was able to go. The bus can arrive late – or not at all – and there are days when it is hard to breathe because there are so many patrons on the bus. My career guide and I would figure out ways to make public transit more manageable, and that is important given that getting there is half the battle.

While in the project, I downplayed some significant moments. Interviews are scary things, and I feigned competence and confidence before my first informational interview with a practitioner in the field of social work. Meeting with Jared after the completion of the interview, I revealed how momentous the occasion had been. A few months earlier, I had panicked when my psychologist had offered to set me up for a pseudo interview with a fellow psychologist as a form of exposure therapy. During my time in Career Visions I conducted six informational interviews, gaining both knowledge and experience in the process.

My last six months of Career Visions were focused primarily on finding and obtaining part-time employment. Through those six months, I applied for and sent letters of interest to over a hundred jobs. I had three interviews; the vast majority of organizations to which I applied never contacted me, even after I followed up once or twice. One of the interviews resulted in a job doing data entry for a

non-profit once a week. As this was my first job in a few years, and first job in an office setting, I was unsure of how to conduct myself. I did not want to bring attention to myself since I was concerned about being an inconvenience. I was also concerned that my employer would think I was lazy if I were seen away from my desk, so I went the entire six hour shift without getting up to go to the bathroom or eat. This happened the first couple of times I went in: although my employers were very nice and easy going, I did not feel comfortable leaving my desk if I did not have a scheduled, allotted time to do so. Ultimately I improved my self-advocacy skills by letting my employer know when I would take lunch.

Had I not gained experience and comfort in that setting, I believe my chances of obtaining my full time job would have decreased. Everything I did in the Career Visions Project was for a purpose.

### ADVICE TO OTHER YOUNG ADULTS

My advice to my peers is to be persistent and get the help you need.

This time last year I was in the Career Visions Project, meeting weekly with Jared and learning about job skills, resources, and how to best accomplish my goals. My goals were to graduate college in good standing, get a job, and maybe apply to graduate school. Now? I work full-time in a job in my field and attend grad school, after graduating on time with honors for my bachelor's degree. I hope I can serve as some sort of inspiration to others. Although I realize I look the epitome of cool, calm, and collected now, let me assure you it wasn't always that way. The truth of the matter is that I was a hot mess for a long time.

Getting the help you need is crucial. It is unfortunate that there is still stigma associated with mental health troubles. Personally I feel that I have not done enough to combat that stigma, and that is both the reason I am writing this and the reason it is anonymous. Sometimes it is difficult to remember that it is not the person, but the natural response to an environment or situation that makes a person alternatively abled. We are capable.

And for those of us who are service providers: be empathetic, knowledgeable, and consistent. A relationship of trust is important when providing services to anyone. Do what you say you will. Do not pity your clients. Be flexible and ready to help think of solutions when obstacles arise. You have the potential to make a difference in empowering a person. I don't need a friend; I need an ally.

### AUTHOR

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