



## Supported Employment Success Stories

Supported Employment, just like all employment, is fluid, changing over time. Employment can be a great equalizer and unifier. Or, it can be a divider and an unjust discriminator. Employment in itself is not enough. Good Supported Employment stories can awaken imaginations and enliven new thinking – seeing the best in people and trying previously unrecognized possibilities. The following stories illustrate positive principles in practice. These stories should not be remarkable, but ordinary. They're not perfect but are works in progress – like all good employment. If you have a good Supported Employment story you'd like to share, then please contact Katie Wolf Whaley, [kwolf@uky.edu](mailto:kwolf@uky.edu)

### ***Tony – Transitioning from School to Work***

Tony began his work at the local school district bus garage while still a high school student. Job fit is an especially important consideration, and fortunately, Tony's Employment Coordinator, Maria, recognized this. Rather than plopping Tony into any available job, she devoted time to get to know Tony – understanding his interests and talents as well as things that need to be in place for him to be successful. (If students are arbitrarily "placed" in jobs, without attention to typical employment motivators, such as jobs they're interested in and with fair pay, then they may learn that they don't like to work, or don't want to work. These early work experiences are powerful for everyone.)

Maria discovered that Tony had a unique ability to memorize numbers, and he also knew some things about cars, trucks, and buses. Plus, he had an interest in automotive keys. So, where might Tony's interests and abilities be marketable? Enter the school district's bus garage. Maria negotiated work where Tony was located and provided bus keys to drivers. Ultimately, this meant that Tony memorized 125 bus numbers and keys and matched them with the corresponding drivers. ("Number twenty-six; here are your keys.") Tony also assisted with custodial duties. Working limited hours while he was a student, Tony nonetheless had his foot in the door for engaging and interesting work – a place where he could contribute and learn about good employment.

Now for the "what's next" part of the story: Since Tony was in a fitting job, and because he would need some level of continuing support, his Office of Vocational Rehabilitation counselor referred him to a Supported Employment program during his last semester in school. This way

his Employment Specialist could get to know Tony and his co-workers, keeping things in place that are working well, while expanding possibilities.

Jane and Jorge, Tony's Employment Specialists from Employment Opportunities, spent time at the bus garage seeking: 1) additional ways Tony could contribute, 2) a corresponding increase in hours, and 3) Tony becoming an employee of the school system. Recalling Tony's interest in cars, buses, and trucks, Jane negotiated new tasks, and increased hours for Tony assisting at the bus compound's inspection stations: checking oil and fluids, brake testing, checks of lights and instruments, recording fuel usage, and placing signage on substitute buses – while continuing his earlier responsibilities. Also, Tony became a school district employee. Jorge provides periodic support, much of which involves connecting Tony with co-workers and heightening expectations about ways Tony can contribute.

*Lessons learned:* 1) Good employment experiences are important for all high school students; however, good employment experiences are essential for high school students with disabilities. 2) It's not necessary that first jobs be the kind of work where students ultimately find a vocation or career. After all, it's a first job. But it is important that the job fits the student and provides a positive experience, "a good taste" of employment. 3) When a Supported Employment program picks up support for a graduating student in an existing job (because it's determined to be a good job), then a primary responsibility is seeking advancements.

### ***Mallory – The Presumption of Employment***

Groundhog coloring, everywhere! It's Tuesday morning, and Groundhog Day Eve is being observed in Ms. Paulette's four-year-old class at Kids' Haven by Sandy. Then, Ms. Mallory arrives. Groundhog coloring becomes passé. "Ms. Mallory's here. It's book time!"

Ms. Mallory wheels up to the front of the room. The coveted role of a page-turner is selected for the first story. "Pick me! Pick me!" (Unfortunately, for the page-turner bidders, there's no lobbying for this spot. Page-turners need to wait until their names appear in order on the list. This way, everyone gets a turn working with Ms. Mallory.)

Her way of reading stories is not traditional. But traditional is still a concept that's in the process of forming for this age group. Using a head switch connected to the computer, Ms. Mallory clicks the switch at the end of each pre-recorded page. The switch turns the page on the computer screen and signals a "beep." The beep cues the 4-year-old page-turner, and the recorded voice simultaneously reads the new page.

The second book, "Clifford, the Big Red Dog," ends. Storytime is over. There's a rush to Ms. Mallory – kids anxious to show the morning's groundhog artwork.

There was a time, not too far back, when work for Mallory hadn't been on the table. But to Sandy, an Employment Specialist with Realizations, it made all the sense in the world. After all, Mallory is a young adult, and work is one of the things that happens for most young adults during the day. Mallory didn't know what she wanted to do. So, Sandy devoted time with Mallory, determined to discover her talents and interests.

Over time, it became apparent to Sandy that little ones were interested in Mallory, and Mallory clearly enjoyed being around them. Sandy arranged to visit a childcare center, Kids' Haven by Sandy (no affiliation with Sandy the Employment Specialist), offering to perform a needs analysis – unobtrusively learning about what happens and looking for unmet needs. And if unmet needs are found, Sandy will suggest a solution. As things turned out, the teachers were frustrated that there were not enough hands on deck to read to the children as much as was desirable.

The rest is history. A customized job was negotiated for Mallory. Children get to hear more books. Mallory gets a job working with kids. And kids get to know Ms. Mallory, a teacher who reads aloud in a non-traditional way.

It's important to note that this is the beginning of Mallory's employment story. Many chapters are still to be written. Mallory and Sandy are exploring additional employment, perhaps doing something similar to her work at Kids' Haven by Sandy, or perhaps something different.

*Lessons learned:* 1) Employment is important for everyone to consider. 2) Kids are always learning something. Who belongs and who doesn't? Who is like me, and who is different? Who should I share my things with, or not? Little people can be immune to big people's prejudice if introduced positively to people who, for instance, read stories aloud in a non-traditional way. 3) Much learning is going on when Ms. Mallory is working — important learning for everyone involved.

### ***Wes – Follow-up, Networking, and Advancement***

Wes had a great job. Having worked in a doctor's office for several years, things were looking good for Wes. Filing patient charts, preparing employee timecards, collating materials for new patient charts, performing searches of clinic computer data for patient records, delivering office parcels, maintaining the inventory room, shredding obsolete records... Wes was well respected by the clinic staff; his work was valued. But Samantha, Wes's Employment Specialist, saw Wes as a man who could contribute even more and increase his income, broadening prospects for a fulfilling career. Wes and his folks thought this sounded great. And even though much was known about Wes's interests and talents, everyone felt stuck when it came to thinking about seeking an additional job.

Samantha suggested a job networking meeting as one way to generate new job ideas. She convened a group of people, including family, friends, and service providers – all of whom had

high expectations for Wes. After a brief time for snacks, chit chat, and meeting one another, the process for the gathering was straightforward: 1) refining a desirable list of work conditions for Wes, 2) tying these conditions to tasks, and finally 3) connecting the tasks to specific employers and contact people. Sixteen people were able to attend the meeting that was graciously hosted in the home Wes shared with his parents. Wall-to-wall people lead to wall-to-wall ideas generated.

However, just as Samantha and Wes were getting started with the new employment connections generated in the job networking meeting, an employer contacted Samantha's agency. Ceridian needed someone to do work that was consistent with the kind of work Wes was seeking.

Samantha visited Ceridian, studied employer needs, and recommended Wes. He was hired to duplicate and file information for Ceridian, maintaining customer account records for their pre-paid gift card program. As Wes became proficient in these tasks, Samantha sought additional ways for Wes to contribute to Ceridian.

*Lessons learned* – 1) Follow-up is a critical aspect of Supported Employment. Samantha provided the spark for Wes to seek advancements. 2) Networking is the primary way that people connect with fitting jobs. Sometimes, an intentional gathering, such as a job networking meeting, is necessary to get things rolling. 3) Finally, it's essential that organizations representing people with disabilities establish themselves as credible, dependable business partners. It's great when the phone call originates from an employer seeking the right person for work they need accomplished.