

REAL JOBS, REAL LIVES

Stories from Employment First Georgia

www.employmentfirstgeorgia.org

Hosted by the Georgia Advocacy Office

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Stories

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“Given the choice between work and idleness, people will almost always choose work. Regardless of our station in life, the conditions of our bodies and minds, or the amount of money in our bank accounts, the need to work remains one of our strongest drives. Work is central to our lives, and as such, gives a large measure of structure to our days. Common sense tells us that we feel better about ourselves when we are working regularly.”

Robert Drake, M.D., Ph.D.



Ana



"Derive happiness in oneself from a good day's work, from illuminating the fog that surrounds us." Henri Matisse

Non-stereotypical. I can't escape the wonder of this idea. If you are interested in non-stereotypical employment for an individual with a developmental disability, then I would like to introduce you to **Ana**. Ana is on the cusp of becoming a professional translator. How's that for non-stereotypical?

A participant in the Workforce Action Grant under the Department of Labor/Office of Disability Employment Policy, Ana has used this opportunity to pursue her employment dreams.

Through vocational profiling and simply getting to know Ana outside the walls of a day program, Liz, her job coach, found out about her dreams of working with children, that she possesses good computer skills, and is bilingual. When asked what her dream job is, Ana responds, "I love to work with children."

Born in Puerto Rico, Ana currently lives with her mother in the Atlanta area. By getting to know Ana outside of a segregated setting, Ana's job coach discovered that Ana's mother speaks limited English, and that Ana uses Spanish exclusively while at home.

A woman with good computer skills, who wants to work with children, and who is bilingual. Between Ana and Liz, an idea was born.

Liz quickly put out feelers for an unmet need in the community that Ana could fulfill. Her cold calls, e-mails, and foot pedaling led Liz to an outreach service located in Ana's community. Liz and Ana met with a coordinator there. The coordinator bonded with Ana and recognized her value. It also became apparent that the early stage of natural support was sparked as a result of this connection.

The coordinator explained that with the Atlanta area's booming Hispanic community, preschool and primary grade teachers were encountering students who could speak only Spanish. The language barrier was frustrating teachers and denying students an education. In other words, they desperately needed what Ana had to offer.

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Ana

He explained what requirements were needed, and Liz and Ana tackled each one. He also had contacts at many local schools and soon arranged an interview with the principal of one of these. He even went so far as to meet with Ana and Liz to coach them for the interview. The interview went well. The principal envisions Ana not only as a translator, but also as an education facilitator and a parent/teacher liaison.

An obstacle that has cropped up is how to pay Ana's salary. The school budget will not be adequate. (Remember, Ana's position did not exist until she and Liz identified this unmet need.) In July, Ana and Liz will meet with the school's corporate sponsors who fund special projects.

Part of what Ana will bring with her to the job is a state-of-the-art computer system. Just as an executive might bring a college degree to the bargaining table, or a mechanic might bring along tools and expertise to a potential employer, Ana brings this computer set-up. Referred to as "resource ownership," these resources that Ana has to offer a potential employer belong to her and were made possible through the funding of the Workforce Action Grant (Griffin & Hammis, 2003). The resources belong to Ana. Just as the mechanic keeps his tools, or the executive retains her degree, Ana's computer will remain hers if she and her employer part ways. She plans on using her computer to teach technology and language skills to children.

Looking to the future, Ana has applied to Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) for additional funding. Transportation is also an issue that will have to be addressed, but Ana has a supportive family and makes friends quickly. Job coaching will be available for as long as Ana requires it, with the goal of this paid support fading away as natural supports (family, friends, co-workers) take its place.

Looking back at the Henri Matisse quote, about how a good day's work will illuminate the fog that surrounds us, I can't help but be struck by the fact that Ana's career path takes this idea a step further. Through her unique skills, she will help children communicate and connect with their community - and illuminate the fog that might otherwise surround them. ■



Brian



By Allison Cohen Hall

Brian is a man in his 20s who loves working with animals. After graduating from high school, Brian worked at a department store, where his responsibilities were not a good fit for his skills and his interests. He and his job coach made the decision to seek employment that would better match his passions and goals. Brian was able to purchase valuable equipment and use it to negotiate with a business where he was eventually hired.

Brian was served by an employment provider agency in Georgia that was moving people out of sheltered workshops and into community-based employment. The provider was receiving training on customized employment. Customized employment is a flexible blend of strategies, services, and supports designed to increase the rate of employment for job seekers through negotiating with businesses to find a fit between their needs and a potential employee. Many of these ideas were used to help Brian develop and pursue his goals. The provider put together an employment planning team to help uncover his interests and identify opportunities within his local community that would meet his needs. This is called "job seeker exploration." The team included Brian, his parents, his VR counselor, his job coach, and a former teacher. They met regularly over several months and uncovered one of Brian's passions—working with animals. His job coach used her knowledge of the local area and found a small grooming business that had recently opened near Brian's home and began to explore opportunities for employment.

Brian's job coach approached the employer and asked what service or product they could offer to help them grow their business. They immediately identified a need for hydraulic lifts for the animals, which would ease the physical stress on the groomers. The job coach realized that she now had leverage to sell a solution to the employer. This is called "finding a negotiation point" in customized employment. Together the job coach and the employer went through a catalog for groomers and chose equipment that would benefit the business. Brian's team

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Brian

was committed to his passion for working with animals, and they brainstormed creative ways to fund this equipment. This would give Brian something tangible to contribute to the business in addition to his personal skills. The team decided to use funds from a Customized Employment Grant to purchase the equipment on Brian's behalf. Bringing this important resource to the business, the job coach negotiated wage and responsibilities, and Brian became a salaried employee. Funding from Brian's state Vocational Rehabilitation agency paid for training that has enabled Brian to feel comfortable walking to and from his job, as well as early job coaching. Brian's co-workers provided the bulk of the initial training and ongoing support. A job coach checks in with Brian and the employer a few times per month to troubleshoot any issues that arise on the job.

Brian currently works 30 hours per week and has been employed for five years. His responsibilities include all the aspects of dog grooming and customer service, and he is in charge of independently opening the business on some mornings. His employment provider feels that Brian is not just employed but on a career path, as his responsibilities at the business have increased over the years. His reputation as a person who needs significant support on a job has changed into that of a successful entrepreneur who, through his own resources, has made a business even more successful. His employer has said that she is extremely happy with Brian's work and finds him stable, dependable, and hard-working. Brian reports that he likes everything about his job, including both the people he works with and the animals.



Lessons learned:

- Resource ownership, as in the case of Brian bringing equipment with him to the job of groomer, is one way for an individual to add value to what they can contribute to a business.

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Brian

- Having access to money that can be used in creative ways is key in creating opportunities to become linked up with businesses. For example, the PASS Plan from the Social Security Administration can allow a person to purchase job-related equipment or provide the funds to start a small business. Vocational Rehabilitation can purchase skill training, capital equipment, vehicle repairs and insurance, work clothes, adaptive equipment, and computers. Many community rehabilitation programs can use funds to meet employment needs.
- Brian began with a "job seeker exploration" process, which asks the questions, "Who is this person?" and "What are the ideal conditions for employment?" This is crucial as it reveals the person's interests, skills, and passions that help the team uncover opportunities.
- Brian's employment with the groomer created a win–win situation. It resulted in a career path for Brian and increased business for the employer.
- Brian's financial contribution to the business enabled the initial connection with the employer, but his increase in responsibilities and his longevity on the job can be attributed to supportive co-workers, regular contact with a job coach, his own strong work ethic, and a successful job match. ■



Charles



Charles has a passion for cars and dreams of becoming a mechanic. He and his employment consultant went to various auto-parts companies close to his home to submit applications. He had his sights set on a particular dealership. It was about 2 ½ miles from his home, brand new, and just the place he wanted to work. Every day for three months, he walked the five miles round trip to this business, showing them his employment consultant's card and letting them know he wanted to work for their company. Even though Charles has a developmental disability and has no verbal language, there is no doubt what he is indicating through his facial expressions. Although he has limited use of his right arm and leg, he has learned to adapt and effectively uses his left side in compensation.

His support staff finally received the call Charles had been hoping for. The car dealership's manager said, "Okay, we are convinced. We want to hire him." The CEO was moved by Charles' commitment and determination to work at his business. His job title is mechanic assistant, and his carved-out duties include pressure washing, spraying-painting the tire rims of vehicles, stocking, and cleaning up. Charles, who is in his 30s, went from high school into a residential VR agency-funded vocational program. Other than this assessment period, he has not attended segregated programs.

Charles definitely thinks of his current employment choices as a part of a long-term career path, which he is determined will always involve cars. ■



Evert



Evert has a passion about washing cars, which he would practice given the opportunity. He has a developmental disability and requires psychiatric supports. He came to his employment support team knowing exactly what he wanted to do. Again, networking connections were used to identify a high-end car wash business called a car spa. The team met with the car spa owner to see what could be worked out.

Because the car spa was a new business and capital was an issue at times, the spa owner wanted access to a piece of equipment called an extractor that cleans the carpet very thoroughly. Fortunately, over time, the team was able to

negotiate wage employment for Evert. Evert would purchase the extractor as a resource ownership by blending his wages with funds from VR, his Individual Training Account (ITA), and some traditional funding through the developmental disability service system. The employment team was able to pull all these funding sources together as part of his funding package.

Evert is an apprentice and has just completed his first training sessions about how to use his extractor. There are probably three or more trainings that he'll go through as an apprentice. Evert's goal is to open his own car wash, and the car spa owner has made a commitment to Evert. He already knows where there is a car wash that Evert could potentially operate. Within 9-12 months they are going to look at branching out so that Evert can open his own business with the support of this owner. ■



Kaleb has a lot to offer an employer, which became clear during his planning process. A set of resources to support his employment plan was obtained by blending funds through the traditional Medicaid waiver funding system, a typical funding stream for community-based services, with funds from Kaleb's ITA. As staff got to know Kaleb better, they learned that in addition to his very traditional diagnostic label (of having mild or moderate intellectual disabilities), he had tremendous potential. The staff found that traditional assessments really didn't provide information they could use to help make someone's dreams come true and improve the quality of his or her life, so they often disregarded that assessment information. Instead, the staff focused on gaining an understanding of the background of an individual and recognizing that his interests are still evolving and being defined.

Kaleb had an interest in working with children and learning more about computers. He received computer training, and the staff found a position for Kaleb in a small private school. The owner of the school did not have the means to provide computer training to students. Kaleb was able to purchase a computer and all the software, a computer table, and a chair. He set up a computer lab in the school and began providing lessons to the students. Families loved the new service, and Kaleb became a valuable member of the school staff. ■



Martha

Martha worked in the laundry room of a hotel. Although she did a good job and was content with her daily schedule, she would continually talk about wanting to have a job working with athletes, like her father, who was a runner. Martha's employment support team met with her to learn more about her array of interests.

The team went with Martha to some stores that sell exercise equipment as well as to athletic environments to see how she reacted to each place. It became very clear that she wanted to work in a gym. The support team contacted the owner of the gym in their office complex. He was open to talking with the team and was sensitive to the effect of work on the quality of life of all people. The owner started out saying, "Okay, we'll try Martha working for us for a week." The week turned into two weeks, then three weeks, and before long, the employer was saying, "Where's Martha? She didn't come in today."

The support team knew Martha had her eye on some of the equipment that gym members were using. The team met with the owner and asked him to identify the one piece of equipment that he needed and that would be in pretty continual use. The unequivocal answer was a weight machine.

Martha then actively pursued a weight machine that she could operate. She found the machine and purchased it with funds from her ITA. After that, she attended training to learn how to operate the machine and teach gym members simple exercises to do on the machine. Now, Martha is happy that she works in a fitness environment and enjoys helping others to stay in shape. She has even invited her father a few times and has shown him some exercises to do on her weight machine. ■



Tanya

Tanya attended a segregated day program for individuals diagnosed with both intellectual disabilities and mental illness. As a result of her involvement in traditional segregated programs that lacked choice and options, she became depressed.

She became a candidate for supported employment early in a systems-change process and before the award of the Customized Employment Grant. The strategy was to begin with willing individuals and their families in hopes that their successes would encourage those who were more resistant to the changes, to loosen their grip on the status quo. With Tanya's permission and input, staff developed a circle of support involving her family, key friends, and others chosen by Tanya, away from the day program, doing what she enjoyed so the staff could learn about her in diverse environments. A vocational profile emerged that took into account Tanya's desire to dress professionally, have a computer, and work in a business environment.

Time was spent in several companies simply observing the social climate of the business. It became clear during the planning process that a calm and flexible work environment was key. A Fortune 500 company was identified that met the specifications. Tanya could meet some of the job duties with supports from a job coach and co-workers. A customized position was negotiated with input from the company's human resources, administration, and senior management staff.

The company is located in a corporate office in the business district of Atlanta. A facilities clerk position was carved out for Tanya, and her job duties consist of data entry, office supply distribution, and conference room scheduling. Tanya has been successfully employed in the position for more than two years. As a result of her success, the director of human resources asked if Tanya would be interested in job sharing. Her employment consultant identified a second person who also has the label of moderate intellectual disabilities. Tanya works from 7 a.m. to 11 a.m., Monday through Thursday, and Lori, her job-share partner, works from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m., Tuesday through Friday.

The work that Tanya and Lori provide for this company has resulted in greater productivity in their co-workers, and neither has been affected by the corporate layoffs that others have had to endure. The human resources director told Tanya and Lori that she hopes they will remain with the company for a long time to come. ■



Val



Val's employment consultant first met her in the office of a VR counselor when Val's file with VR was in the process of being closed. The counselor told the employment consultant that Val's situation was "very difficult..., but I want to give her one more chance." Her labels include a developmental disability and behavior disorder. She has some limitation in the use of her left arm.

Val's mom is very supportive and wants her daughter to have a "good life." She also wants to make sure her daughter is safe, so work options have to be in environments that take safety into consideration.

The employment consultant spent time with Val in various places and environments to get to know her. The thing that consistently made all of Val's previous job matches unsuccessful was that none of the jobs took into consideration Val's passions, desires, and dreams. A new approach was used with Val – a person-centered planning process that involved the people important to her life. The planning process included a community-based vocational profile that helped define choices for Val. Those involved learned that Val wanted to work in an office in a secretarial role.

After extensive creative planning, a starting point for a job search was identified. Val's employment specialist/job consultant knew of an auto detailing company, and she was able to negotiate a carved-out position. As the secretarial manager, Val would be responsible for writing down the vehicle identification numbers (VINs) of the cars that were being serviced, answering the telephone, and greeting customers. She was readily accepted as one of the team and quickly fell into the good-humored bantering that bonded the employees and defined the office culture as professional, focused on quality, and appreciative of humor in the workplace.

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Soon after hiring Val, the owner contacted her employment consultant to let her know that there was a problem. Low productivity was not the issue. Val loved her job and worked hard. The problem was that she made mistakes when copying down the VINs. In a more traditional system, this difficulty might have been the point at which the job was terminated. But because the focus was on Val's passion, and she had already proven wrong the notion that she was unemployable by her hard work and interest in her duties, the employment consultant asked the owner to allow the support team time to determine what could be done to assist Val.

Through an Internet search, the team identified state-of-the-art equipment that uses a computer program and a stick or wand to register VINs, thereby eliminating error. This adaptation enabled Val to remain in her job. She performs her job duties with competence and has a valued role in this business. Val's mom feels secure in the knowledge that Val is doing something she loves and is in a work environment that is accepting of and values Val. ■



The Georgia Microboard Association

The Georgia Microboard Association was formed to provide training and ongoing assistance to small, nonprofit organizations called microboards throughout the state, whose mission is to oversee the supports and services of one individual with a disability. The Association is committed to providing ongoing information and support to the person and to the development of relationships between members that will last a lifetime.

The Association provides all of the technical advice, sample documents, organizational charts, and examples of what is required at each step of development. It educates all interested parties and helps association members connect with one another, sharing ideas and solving problems.

The protection and advocacy system hosts the Georgia Microboard Association. Many microboard owners have started their own businesses.



Amy held her first art exhibit and started working in her art studio last spring. She started using her Dynavox communication device around the same time. Amy makes cards with her art on them. She has a business plan, and she proudly made her first sale at the APSE conference in Atlanta last summer. When Amy's mother saw her art in the form of beautiful greeting cards, she proudly exclaimed, "This is REAL art!"

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The Georgia Microboard Association



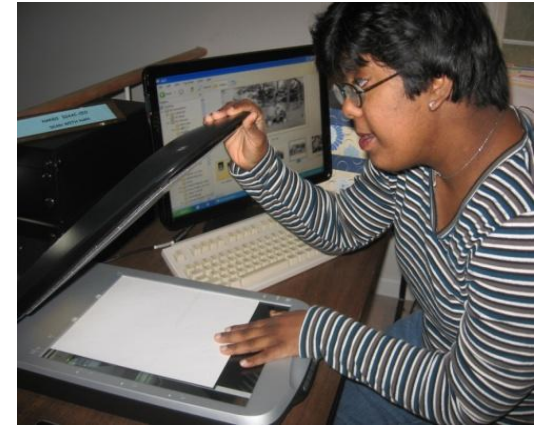
Jorie opened a jewelry business in north Georgia where she lives with her parents. What began as a hobby has turned into a booming business with a large line of bracelets including a faith bracelet, a salvation bracelet, a peace bracelet, a bridal bracelet, and a breast cancer awareness bracelet. Jorie, along with other entrepreneurs, receives support to develop her business plan from nationally-recognized Dr. Ruthie Beckwith. Business plans include information about marketing and sales and ensure that the business owner is aware of how his or her profits will affect Social Security benefits. Not only is Jorie selling her bracelets individually, but she has expanded her business to high-end bridal boutiques.



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The Georgia Microboard Association



Scan with Nan started when **Nandi** matched the needs of her community to have their boxes of photographs scanned and her love of photography. Nandi scans photographs and stores them electronically for her customers. She started her business with the support of her job coach provided through her Medicaid waiver and her parents.

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The Georgia Microboard Association



Tyler has an eye for change. He combined his gift as a photographer and a simple household item, a light switch plate, and created a piece of art. Tyler is a young man who experiences Asperger's syndrome and receives employment supports through his Medicaid waiver. As such, he has been able to travel with his newly formed business and sell custom-made switch plates across Georgia. Tyler sold several light switch plates at the APSE conference last summer and took orders for future sales. Most recently, Tyler the Switch Changer was a featured guest at the Georgia Aquarium's Abilities Expo, held in Atlanta on February 4-5, 2011. The Abilities Expo provided an opportunity for businesses and individuals to showcase services designed to assist people with disabilities to live full, quality lives. ■



Ronnie



By Nancy Brooks-Lane

Before I got all the way through the door to **Ronnie's** house, he was already pointing, indicating he wanted to be elsewhere, out of here, on his way to gone.

Jacque and Big Ronnie, Ronnie's parents, told me he'd gotten off to a bad start that day. They said he was struggling. I was certain that this visit, my first to his house in the three years I'd known his family, had figured into that struggle. Ronnie doesn't speak, so I guessed probably he got worried that things wouldn't go right. In fact, things were going very right for us all, thanks to Ronnie's own enterprising spirit.

Nearly three years before, I first met his mom. I was up on a ladder, painting a ceiling and eavesdropping on her conversation with a staff person at the employment provider where I worked at that time. Jacque's passion, to have an impact on the life of her son, someone that many human service systems wanted to categorize and "place" out of sight, is what got my attention. "This is going to be good," I told myself. And I was right.

Later, I met Jacque's husband, Big Ronnie, and saw he shared her passion for making a life for their son. "Wow," I told myself, "This is even better."

Soon I was reading Ronnie's records where experts gave him a series of labels. By the time I met Ronnie in person, I was geared up to deal with a real handful.

The Ronnie I met was pleasant, with gracious manners, a gentle and polite demeanor.

Yes, it was clear that he wants some control over events and the environment he lives in. Don't we all?

He has unconventional ways of communicating, but since he demands our presence in the moment, time with him is very well spent.

Both Jacque and Big Ronnie are unabashedly devoted to their son. Their dearest hope is that he will have a real

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Ronnie

future. This family has a genuine joy in life and, over our time together, I've seen them take pleasure in their smallest moments together.

On the human services merry-go-round

The family had taken the typical ride that most folks with disabilities seem to endure. On the human services merry-go-round, difference is not valued and the rules for people with disabilities are different than the rules for people without them.

Jacque and Big Ronnie say they've met some good people and found some strong supports, but for the most part they've had to fight. It was an ongoing battle to ensure that their son would get something going in his life in public school, during the transition process, and after graduation. The stakes were high and the forces arrayed against them were powerful.

What they wanted for Ronnie was no different from what any parents want for their children – a chance for a good and fulfilling life. Thanks to their efforts, Ronnie didn't get stuck in segregated classes or routed to facility-based services, didn't get isolated and lost.

Early on, Jacque and Big Ronnie accepted their role of full-time advocates for Ronnie. They came to see themselves as the real experts on what supports might bring their son a real life, a life that he chose.

They hoped then, and hope still, to work in partnership with teachers, support systems, and others to be part of the team. They wanted then, and want now, to be heard, and especially to have Ronnie's preferences, dreams and wishes respected.

They love to tell the high points in those long years, the breakthroughs – new understandings and developments that opened a way for them and their son. They found that their son could communicate with them on a keyboard. Some support networks developed and they began to see Ronnie included in his community on his own for the first time. They came to understand that behavioral struggles are a form of communication. And they found choices, for themselves and for their son.

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Ronnie

When Ronnie left the public school system, he and his family had a choice of providers for transition services. They chose the employment provider where Debbie and I worked at the time. Debbie was an employment consultant, a key player in Ronnie's success story.

Debbie began connecting with Ronnie by simply spending time with him, paying attention, doing things he wanted to do in places he wanted to be.

When all the traditional assessment reports had described him as unemployable, Debbie paid no mind to that. She believed that the only way to be of assistance to Ronnie was to pay attention to him, spending time with him, the two of them off on their own, getting to know one another, working things out.

The first job Robbie and Debbie carved out for him was delivering marketing materials. He did a great job of it, too; the manager of the company said so. When the economic downturn came, though, the company had to lay off staff. Still, the fact that he had done the job and done it well proved all the negative labels wrong in a way that no one could deny.

Around this time, the employment provider won a Department of Labor Office of Disability Employment Policy grant to provide innovative, non-stereotypical job opportunities for people with disabilities through customized employment planning.

Now Ronnie, Debbie, Jacque, and Big Ronnie could think about Ronnie working for himself. That would give him some flexibility – something traditional employment can't offer. Self-employment makes integration into the working world possible.

Customized employment planning is a creative, fluid process. There are starts and stops, with times to regroup and chances to take thoughtful risks. Nobody knows all the answers up front. It's an evolution, with weekly decision-making and problem-solving sessions. Because it's unconventional, it's not easy. But it worked for Ronnie.

He's been self-employed for about a year now. He has a business plan, a vision for his future, and a business of his own. He picks up, launders, sterilizes, dries, folds, packages, and delivers towels for barbershops and hair salons in his community.

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Ronnie

Through the grant, with funds from his ITA, he bought sterilizing and drying machines, had advertising materials printed, and had signs made for the doors of the Jeep that he rebuilt and owns. Today he delivers the towels with the person who provides his employment supports. His business is doing so well that before too long Ronnie will need to decide whether to go into partnership or hire an employee.

Advise from the real experts

I asked Jacque and Big Ronnie what advice they wanted to share with readers about their journey. “Give people with disabilities respect and kindness. Look for messages in ‘behaviors’ – they are communications. Don’t give up. Have hope.

“Parents, don’t try to force your sons and daughters to live in your world; let them live in their own and include you when and how they want. Always offer new opportunities, and give hope.”

Debbie, Ronnie’s employment counselor, had some advice too. “Don’t get locked into conventional modes of thinking. Be wary of labels and of traditional assessments. Pay attention.”

I thanked Ronnie for letting me have this time with him and the significant folks in his life, and asked if he had a message I could pass along. He grabbed up his keyboard and typed, “I am loved. I love Deb. I am working too hard.”

I answered, “You are loved. What do you mean about working too hard?”

“Think openly, Nancy,” he wrote. “Openly is this day.”

When I saw what he meant, I asked him, “Today, this day, seemed real hard?”

Then he wrote, “I just love a life.”

Until he admonished me to think openly, I missed the poetry and sophistication in what he’d told me. Thinking openly, there are going to be hard days, and this was one, even in the life he loves. *That’s life.*

When I returned a few weeks later with my camera, Ronnie was having a fantastic day, excited about having his working life documented in photographs. He was eager to show me his state-of-the-art sterilizing and drying machines, and his Jeep. He invited me along to meet his customers while he delivered clean towels to the businesses where he has contracts.

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Ronnie

A challenge to the system

Ronnie today poses an interesting challenge to conventional assumptions. This young man owns and, with a bit of support, manages, a business. He is living the American dream, demonstrating what can become of people if the people who serve them will first pay attention and then set their prejudices aside.

As Ronnie moved through the delivery day we spent together, the sense of connection and community between him and his customers was palpable. He was welcome in their shops, and his competence at his job was crystal clear. ■