



On the job:

Stories from youth with disabilities



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Every young person—
with and without disabilities—
should have the opportunities
and supports needed to pursue
meaningful work.



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Jobs help youth explore their strengths and interests, develop relationships in the community, formulate their future goals, and learn important workplace skills.

Think back on your very first job. If you are like most Americans,¹ your memories probably take you back to high school and a part-time job you held after school, on the weekends, or during the

summer. Perhaps you worked at a fast food restaurant, a local grocery market, or a retail store at the mall. Or maybe your job was more informal, such as having a paper route, babysitting, or mowing lawns in your neighborhood. Those early work experiences provided an important avenue for you to develop lifelong skills,

knowledge, and attitudes. Managing a schedule, taking on increasing responsibilities, learning to follow through on commitments, working well with others, and developing a strong work ethic are just a few of the lessons you might have learned through these first job experiences.

For youth with significant disabilities, these early work experiences during high school *are just as important*. Among the strongest predictors of post-school employment success is whether or not students with disabilities held one or more paid jobs during high school.² Put simply, students with significant disabilities who work in the community during high school are much more likely to be employed in early adulthood. As with all youth, these jobs help youth explore their strengths and interests, develop relationships in the community, formulate their future goals, and learn important workplace skills. And the earlier students start, the more they have to gain.

Yet, for many youth with cognitive disabilities, autism, or multiple disabilities, the challenges associated with having a paid job in the community can at first seem quite daunting. These youth usually need considerable help from others to find and maintain employment. However, many transition teachers feel they don't

have the time, resources, or knowledge to develop community jobs or support students in the workplace. Often, school programming does not focus on job placement until students are 18 or older, during the "community-based" phase of a student's educational experience. Even then, potential jobs are often limited to those occurring exclusively during school hours when job coaches and transportation are available. As a result, the vast majority of youth with significant disabilities end up missing out on these important early work experiences³.

But it can be done!

In this booklet, we have compiled six stories of youth who benefited from a different approach. Rather than depending exclusively on formal supports from their schools or service providers to find and keep their jobs, these youth—and the adults who supported them—drew heavily upon *natural supports* in the workplace and broader community. As you read their

stories, you'll notice that all of these youth have several things in common:

1. Their first work experiences came early, when they were ages 16 to 18;
2. Their jobs paid a competitive wage, minimum wage or better;
3. They all loved their jobs; and
4. They all had significant disabilities.

The ways in which they found their jobs and the supports they drew upon each vary. Within each story, we highlight just a few of the factors that may have led to their success. It is truly a team effort and there are many ways that schools, family members, employers, community members, and youth themselves can each contribute to supporting these youth. We are telling their stories in the hope that readers can learn from their experiences and be encouraged to explore creative and effective ways to support rich and satisfying early employment experiences for *all* youth.

¹ Zimmer-Gembeck & Mortimer (2006)

² Test, Mazzotti, Mustian, Fowler, Kortering, & Kohler (2009)

³ Carter, Austin, & Trainor (in press); Carter, Ditchman, Sun, Trainor, Swedeen, & Owens (2010)



Joe's story



If anyone at Features Sports Bar and Grill in Holmen wants to know who is pitching for the Brewers that night, or what time the game starts, they know to just ask Joe.

Joe is a senior at Holmen High School and has been working at Features for nearly two years. He started as a dishwasher in the kitchen, but was quickly promoted to a "busser" at the "front of the house," where he has become well-known among many of the restaurant's regular customers.

"My favorite thing about working here is meeting new people," Joe says as he sits at a table in the main dining room. "You work hard. You get to meet the customers. You get a paycheck. That's important! I usually save it because I'm saving for an iPod."

Joe's boss at Features, James, says that Joe is well-known by both staff and customers, who ask about him on weekends when he isn't at work. "I'm the face of the business—and Joe has stepped into that role, too. I've introduced him to so many people and they all like him. All the other kids his age who work with him respect him, too. Joe is such a genuine nice guy. Before he clocks out, he says goodbye to every single employee and even customers."

But the real reason Joe is so successful at work, James says, is because he has an excellent work ethic and is a thorough worker. And Joe says he works so hard because he loves his job.

Part of that success goes back to his school team at Holmen High School. His teacher, Lori, gives all her students interest inventories to determine what types of work they would enjoy

most. Lori laughs at some of the situations she has been in because of her strong commitment to finding jobs that fit students' strengths and interests. Joe's friend Brandon wants to be a gunsmith, so Lori had to get their principal's permission when she found him several work experiences in local gun shops.

Lori worked with Joe, who has a cognitive disability, for several years to identify goals, take the steps he needs to meet his goals, stick up for himself, and try new experiences. She says Joe has worked hard while in high school to develop his



"My favorite thing about working here is meeting new people."

Joe's story

communication skills, take appropriate risks, meet new people, and try new things.

Joe's strong interest in and knowledge of sports and music made a sports-themed restaurant a logical choice. Then Holmen's transition coordinator, Brenda, had to find a willing business.



When she first called Features, James was interested. But the owner had had a previous experience hiring someone with a disability that did not go well. As a relatively new manager, James wanted to take a more active role in the community by establishing ties to the school and other local entities. He assured the owner

that he would personally handle Joe's training and supervision.

James and Brenda worked together on developing a job shadowing experience. Then, Brenda set up some job coaching for Joe. Darlene, a paraprofessional who served as Joe's initial job coach, provided the supports he needed to learn both the job and the pace needed at a busy restaurant. But she also knew when to back off, fading her support and eventually letting everyone know that Joe didn't need job coaching anymore.

"We were wise about doing

Joe's training properly," James says. "We started him during weekday afternoons when business was slower, and showed him all the jobs. He's always remembered the duties, but we would have to remind him about speed. That way, he could work up to the faster-paced shifts he works now."

James adds that the team-based work arrangement at Features increases Joe's ability to work independently. For example, if Joe finishes a task, other workers—often Joe's peers from Holmen High—will suggest things for him to do. Or, they might remind him to pick up the pace if the restaurant is crowded.

In fact, Features is actually a popular first job for Holmen High students. It has a relatively large number of part-time employees, and is busiest at times when students may be free: evenings and weekends. Joe can quickly name 10 of his fellow students who work at the restaurant, so it is a great job for Joe to connect with other kids.

"He actually works harder than everyone else, and he's fun to have around on the job," says Alex, a fellow co-worker and classmate at Holmen High School. Alex says he has never helped Joe on the job. In fact, because he works the busiest shifts, Joe sometimes shows new employees what to do.

Joe says he loves the team feeling at his job. "Being at Features is just like being on the Brewers," he says. "We're all a team."

Soon, James was suggesting to Brenda that Joe was ready to move out of the kitchen into the dining room, where he could bus tables—a task that requires both speed and an ability to interact with customers. "Because of his work ethic, we wanted to try him out in front," James says. "He's very thorough, so we thought, let's give him more responsibility. We tried him on a variety of tasks, and he's been able to do them all."

Brenda admits she was nervous: Joe hadn't been on the job long, and he didn't have a safety net of paid supports to help him learn these new skills. "But Joe taught me not to box kids in," she says.

Because Joe now no longer has to rely on paid supports, he is free to work a variety of hours, including nights and weekends, when school staff



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Joe's story

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wouldn't be available to coach him. When he isn't playing basketball, he works every Friday and Saturday night from 5 until 9 or 10 p.m., which are the busiest shifts. On most nights, his mother, Susan, gives him a ride to and from work, which is only a couple miles from their home.

Susan also helps Joe remember to ask for time off well in advance for days he can't work. She says the job at Features has taught Joe to be more responsible and plan in advance.

She also said it has helped him develop an appreciation for money and budgeting, laying the groundwork for his long-term goals of working full-time and possibly attending tech school.

Joe also has been able to translate his love of sports into a variety of other activities. He is involved in a sport with Special Olympics during every season: basketball in the winter, track and field in spring, tennis during the summer, and

bowling in the fall. He also is part of an inclusive physical education class at Holmen High School—known as a "unified" class—that involves students with and without disabilities in a variety of team-building and physical fitness activities.

The class, which pairs and groups students with and without disabilities for adventure-style activities like rock-climbing and challenge courses, was the idea of Steve, a teacher who has a background in adventure education/outdoor pursuits and adaptive physical education. A professor at UW-LaCrosse inspired Steve to teach adventure education to students with disabilities. He started with caving and camping trips that included UW-La Crosse students as supports to his group of high schoolers with disabilities, then he tried involving a group of high school seniors instead of the college students.

"After seeing how the two groups interacted and worked as a team, I knew we were on to something great," he says. When the school received grants that provided a climbing wall, ropes challenge

equipment, and fishing equipment, Steve approached a Holmen physical education teacher about creating a team-taught class that would include special education and general education students working on challenge and team-building activities together.

Now in its third year, Steve said the class has helped Joe build friendships with students without disabilities and others in the community through the trips and outdoor activities the class does, as well as helped other students better understand who Joe is and what he can contribute as a classmate and friend. Steve said he sees the value of natural supports from classmates, both in supporting relationships between students with and without disabilities, but also in helping general education students learn team-building and problem-solving skills with people of all different types of backgrounds and abilities.

Joe's school team is still working with him to uncover new ways to connect Joe to opportunities that reflect his interests and strengths. Because of his passion for sports, they are working with a sporting goods store to see if Joe can pick up a second job there, and they are talking with the community Little League program to see if Joe can run the scoreboard for baseball games this summer.

Joe is optimistic about his future, both at work and in the community. "I'm a great worker," he said. "Being I have an interest in sports and music, I know I will be able to find things to do that I like."



Factors contributing to Joe's success

School factors:

- Using interest inventories and individualized conversations with students to match student strengths to possible jobs⁴
- Providing initial coaching supports to learn the job
- Fading adult supports appropriately
- Providing inclusive class opportunities to make friends with peers⁵
- Encouraging ongoing exploration of community opportunities so students gain a variety of community experiences

Employer factors:

- Providing adequate training for new employees
- Offering a team-based work environment
- Providing opportunities for employees to learn new skills and train or help others
- Demonstrating a commitment to hiring high school students
- Having interest in hiring people with disabilities

Community factors:

- Regular patrons at restaurant who get to know staff
- Small, tight-knit community in which many youth find first jobs at restaurants

Youth factors:

- Desiring to work
- Demonstrating attention to detail and thoroughness
- Having a friendly personality
- Possessing a strong work ethic

Family factors:

- Providing needed transportation
- Helping remind youth about scheduling and requesting time off



⁴ Carter, Swedeen, & Trainor (2009)

⁵ Carter, Swedeen, & Kurkowski (2008)



Tyler's story



At Rocky Rococo's in Milwaukee's Mayfair Mall food court, Tyler is simply known as "The man, the myth, the legend."

Tyler's story

That's what his manager nicknamed Tyler after he received a perfect score for customer service and accuracy by a secret shopper who was assigned to randomly review the fast food restaurant. "It all started on a day when we were short-staffed," says Mike, the restaurant's manager. "I called Tyler in, like I do a lot of the time because he is always willing to work. Every month we get a mystery shopper who reviews our food and service, and Tyler got a hundred percent, which is hard to get. There's usually always room for improvement. Now, I'm like, 'you're the man' because he really saved us that day and I know I can always rely on him."



Tyler is a graduate of Rufus King High School in Milwaukee and now has two jobs. He works about 15 to 20 hours each week at Rocky's and has a seasonal dispatching position with Performance Clean for Milwaukee Brewers' home games at Miller Park. As a die-hard Brewers backer, Tyler also is happy to work as many hours as he can get during baseball season—mostly afternoon and Sunday games.

"I like working with people (at Rocky's) and getting my food 50 percent off," Tyler says. "On the days I get called in, I get food for free. With the Brewers, my favorite part is getting to watch the games. If there's a problem, I can ask for help."

Tyler's job at games is unique and well tailored for his attention to detail. He receives clean-up calls from all over the park, identifies the supervisor for the area, then uses a radio microphone to dispatch cleaning crews to the area.

Zendy, Milwaukee Brewers' human resources assistant, says Tyler is thorough, dependable, and always willing to pick up extra shifts. That's important because there are only three dispatchers trained to do what

Tyler does. They don't have a back-up list of people they can call if someone doesn't come to work.

Tyler has a diagnosis on the autism spectrum and experiences delays in processing language, which could create problems in jobs that require high levels of speed and customer service. However, the Milwaukee Public Schools' school-to-work transition program staff, who helped him find both jobs, looked for positions that would play to his strengths of reliability, punctuality, and attention to detail. They also took his individual needs into account when providing him with direct instruction in preparation for both positions, including problem solving, mobility training, customer service, and cash register practice.

Tyler has benefited from a series of work-related opportunities available through the transition program's community assessment and on-the-job training elements. Tyler began his work experiences as a junior—working in retail, transporting patients at a

hospital, and at a variety of food service positions. Each position was half days for a semester. The assessment program was for school credit; the on-the-job position paid minimum wage. Staff members developed performance profiles of Tyler's strengths and areas in need of improvement. They also knew him really well. When he told them he loved Rocky's pizza, the wheels started turning.

"Normally, we might not connect someone with Tyler's type of disability with a job like Rocky's," says Colleen, his special education teacher. "But he's had perfect attendance, he's consistent, he's been successful in numerous jobs through our program, and he can memorize easily. Once he knows the rules, he can do things over and over. That's why we went over rules for working with people and unusual things that might come up."



"Now, I'm like, 'you're the man' because he really saved us that day and I know I can always rely on him."

Tyler's story

Colleen also helped Tyler memorize scripts he could use if he ever encountered trouble with a customer or other common on-the-job challenges that might emerge. Lori and Nora, educational assistants, helped Tyler practice relaying messages using a microphone before he began working at Miller Park. By the time he started, he had learned all the procedures and codes required for the dispatching position. These preparatory experiences were similar to what he might have learned during training on the job, but didn't require extra time from his employers.

"When kids come here, they're half-trained already," Mike says of his collaboration with the school's transition program. "It makes my job easier working with the school. It makes more sense for me because I can describe my needs and they can find someone who will fit. It saves me time in the long run."

The transition program works in partnership with the Department of Vocational Rehabilitation, an international job placement service called Adecco, and many area businesses to match MPS students with disabilities with potential jobs. Jane, an employment training specialist with the district, and Adecco staff get to know

students quite well, so they can effectively sell each student's strengths to potential employers. She says finding job sites is a slow process, but the results pay off over time. For example, the relationship with the Rocky Rococo's restaurant started when teachers got to know the manager because they had lunch there several times a week while working at a job site in the mall. Over the past couple of years, Jane has placed nine students there.

Another skill Tyler learned through the transition program was how to ride the city bus, mapping out the routes for both of his jobs. Tyler can take the bus when he needs to, but his parents are both very supportive of his work schedule and often make sure that either they or one of Tyler's older siblings are available to pick him up after work.

After Tyler had been at Rocky's for nearly a year and had experienced success, Jane and Adecco started discussing possible positions at Miller Park. They knew he was dependable and had great attention to detail. But most positions at the park require

employees to be 18, and many also come with heavy physical requirements. The dispatching job was unique. Of the hundreds of jobs in the park, there are only three dispatching positions.

"I think I went through training (for the Miller Park job) beautifully," Tyler says of the position, which pays \$10 per hour. "I would like to keep the Brewer's job and my job at Rocky's for now."

Although Tyler is done with school, the district's school-to-work team continues to encourage him to apply for new positions. They know he loves movies and is a master at reciting lines from Disney films. So far, local theaters have not been hiring, but the school staff are optimistic he can pick up a third job at a theater sometime in the near future.



"I think I went through training beautifully... I would like to keep the Brewer's job and my job at Rocky's for now."



Tyler's story

Tyler's parents and older siblings have been instrumental in Tyler's success, supplying ongoing support

"Long-term, I'd like to see him working full-time in something suitable to his abilities. He's very capable."

and collaboration with school staff. They have encouraged him to do outdoor chores and yard work in preparation for having his own place some day.

"Long-term, I'd like to see him working full-time in something

suitable to his abilities. He's very capable," says his mother, Jessica. "Eventually we'd like

to have him live on his own or with a roommate. We bought a duplex about five blocks from our house with that in mind down the road."

For now, Tyler is happy with his life the way it is. "I do chores around the house, I like to walk my dog, I play on the computer and listen to music," he says. "Getting to work in a theater... that would be great. Then I could watch all the movies."



Factors contributing to Tyler's success

School factors:

- Establishing community-based job programs
- Offering multiple, short-term work experiences so students can try different types of jobs
- Developing long-term partnerships with professional job development agencies
- Providing direct instruction on necessary job skills before youth begin a new job
- Rehearsing scripts and role playing situations to anticipate challenges that might arise
- Providing bus and mobility training so youth can get to and from work

Employer factors:

- Identifying co-workers and supervisors to contact if a problem arises
- Recognizing that school programs can provide youth employees who already have been trained and are ready to work in high turn-over industries

Community factors:

- Having public transportation available
- Offering multiple job opportunities through larger employers (Mayfair Mall, hospitals, school systems)
- Offering a variety of support services available in the community

Youth factors:

- Expressing a positive attitude
- Having a flexible schedule and willingness to pick up additional shifts on short notice
- Demonstrating attention to detail

Family factors:

- Providing transportation as needed
- Holding high expectations for employment and independent living
- Offering preparatory experiences at home to build skills and promote independence
- Ongoing support from siblings and parents



Patrick's story



A positive attitude and a strong worth ethic can really pay off when looking for a job. But it's also who you know—or get to know through being involved in your community—that really makes a difference.

This is what Patrick learned when he landed his first job at age 16 with Tailored Label Packaging (TLP) in Waukesha County.

Five years and several pay raises later, Patrick is working more hours, has a wider range of job responsibilities, and is recognized throughout the company of 70 employees. He is "an absolute spirit and just very, very cool," says owner Todd, who hired Patrick. "It would be a huge loss if he ever moves on. We'd understand, but he's been a mainstay, increased productivity, and has been an absolutely perfect fit for our company."

Patrick has been involved in a wide range of school and community activities since he was young. He took primarily general education courses through high school, and has participated in a variety of sports, including Special Olympics. Outside school, he has a second degree Black Belt in Tae Kwan Do and has been active and performed a variety of community service projects in and with his church. It was through a church youth work retreat that Patrick first met Todd.

At the work retreat, which Patrick and his dad attended for several years, youth were split into crews and assigned to groups from other denominations. Patrick was in the same group as Todd's son. They were from neighboring communities but different congregations.

"My son on the second or third day said, 'Dad you should meet this kid. He's absolutely amazing.' He told me story after story about how compassionate he was, what a hard working kid he is, and how he really wants to make a difference in these people's lives. Then he said, 'And by the way, he has Down syndrome.'"

Todd paid a little more attention and sought Patrick out to talk with him further. Then, on the final day of the work retreat, Todd's team was reassigned to Patrick's team to complete a project. That's when Todd saw Patrick's work ethic, attention to detail, and generous spirit. Patrick



"He's been a mainstay, increased productivity, and has been an absolutely perfect fit for our company."

Patrick's story

was responsible for finishing off lower portions of the home they were remodeling, organizing lunch for the group of 25 or so workers, and then volunteered to lead the group in prayer.

"From his heart, deep, deep in his soul, Patrick talked about how he was so thankful for the other crews, the weather, the abilities of everyone, and how everyone worked together,"

said Todd, who says he still remembers the whole prayer more than five years later.

"He just spoke from his heart about how thankful he was, how good he felt and how lucky he was and then went around the table and gave everyone a hug. People were just silent. He had such an impact on everyone. Then, after lunch, Patrick was the first one to get back to work. I pulled Brian (Patrick's father) aside and said, 'You know this, but you've got an amazing son. If you would ever consider him working somewhere, I'll find him a spot.'"

Although Patrick was just entering his sophomore year of high school, his parents, Brian and Lisa, were very interested in following up on the job offer. In the fall, Patrick and Brian went to TLP to meet with the president and CEO, Mike. Patrick went through all the normal channels of filling out an application and coming in for an interview.

Once he had landed the job, Patrick came in several times with a Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (DVR) counselor to look at the different jobs and determine what kinds

of work at the factory best suited Patrick's skills. Todd says the business has a lot of heavy equipment and requires employees to complete OSHA training. But management also was willing to show Patrick the duties, rather than expecting him to just read about it in a manual.

A DVR-funded job coach also joined Patrick on the job, but only stayed a week. Patrick was quickly able to learn to do the work without support, and he had several co-workers he could turn to if he had questions.

"That's the great thing about this company—they really took ownership," says Patrick's dad, Brian. "They made sure he went through OSHA training and had a supervisor train him, but they also adapted some of it. They showed him the jobs instead of just having him read the manual."

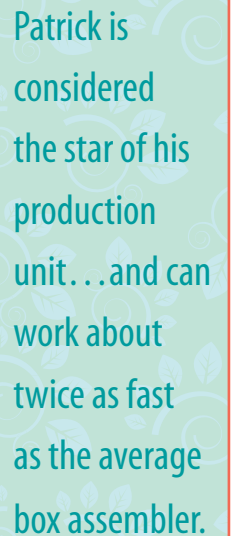
Patrick began working three days a week after school for three-hour shifts at a starting pay \$3 higher than minimum wage. Because TLP is located just over the county line from his house, Patrick could not take the subsidized taxi service he was learning to use. Instead,

his parents drive him the 15 minutes it takes to get to and from work.

When he finished the high school curriculum his senior

year, Patrick was still eligible for school supports, but wanted a more community-based experience. He increased his time at work, and decided to take reading and math instruction through a private, community-based tutoring company, rather than at the school building. Part of his IEP focused on independence, so he learned how to arrange public transportation between home and his tutoring and other activities.

Five years later, Patrick is considered the star of his production unit. He assembles boxes for shipping out the company's product, and can work about twice as fast as the average box assembler, making around 100 an hour. If he takes a vacation, say his co-workers, the place is a mess when he gets back. "He scolds



Patrick is considered the star of his production unit... and can work about twice as fast as the average box assembler.



Patrick's story

He prides himself in his accomplishments and he works toward his goals.

us about our work style," says co-worker Nan. Both Todd and all his co-workers agree that no one has matched Patrick's assembly record, and several adult employees have tried!

Todd says Patrick's unit is more productive when he is working, and that hiring Patrick has been a good business move.

Patrick also works in other areas of the company when they are short-staffed, including marketing and label packaging. He gets regular raises—enough that his father says his college-aged brother and high school sister are both jealous of his paychecks. And he shares in the frequent perks that the company provides, such as gift cards to local businesses and other prizes for high productivity.

Brian attributes at least part of Patrick's success to high expectations. As the oldest of three siblings, he has always been treated like everyone else. "He lives in a family where we all do a lot. Everybody sets

high goals and high standards. Personal integrity is a real important value and he picks up on that," Brian said.

"So when he signs up for a community service day and it's time to work, he works. He knows it's important to do your job. He prides himself in his accomplishments and he works toward his goals. For basketball, he knows it's important to be in shape, so he goes running. For black belt testing, it's not something you can just go and take the test. He had to prepare physically and mentally. He had to write essays. He works hard to be prepared. If he is attending a meeting, he prints out the agenda and reads it thoroughly so he understands it. He has everything set to go."

Patrick agrees, saying he has been responsible for loading and unloading the dishwasher, vacuuming, and cleaning his room as long as he can remember.

Patrick continues to be involved in community service projects and church, where he is a hospitality minister who greets, ushers, and has other assignments. He still goes on the community service mission trips. And he also spends most weekends with a network of friends he has met through Special Olympics. His family also is benefiting from his success. Patrick just bought a new television that he lets everyone watch in the living room.

Patrick says he loves his job and his life, but he has higher aspirations for the future. "My biggest goal is to be an advocate for people with special needs," he says. "I love public speaking and doing presentations."

Patrick already has been active in several self-advocacy efforts. He has presented statewide about his life and employment, along with Todd as a co-presenter. He also has been active in several youth advisory groups and has gone through several youth leadership training programs.

"I love what I do, and I want to stay at my job," Patrick says. "But I also want to do even more."



Factors contributing to Patrick's success

School factors:

- Partnering with DVR to set up supports while youth are still students
- Offering flexible scheduling after students complete four years of high school, but remain eligible for school services

Employer factors:

- Possessing a willingness to modify training
- Having co-workers and supervisors available to troubleshoot and answer questions
- Committing to hiring a diverse workforce
- Encouraging a team-based work environment
- Remaining willing to job-carve to suit individual worker's strengths
- Exploring additional tasks and responsibilities over time

Community factors:

- Offering a wide range of inclusive opportunities
- Providing subsidized and accessible local transportation

Youth factors:

- Having a strong work ethic
- Possessing a willingness to learn new skills
- Having an outgoing personality
- Participating actively in community activities
- Developing self-advocacy and self-determination skills⁶

Family factors:

- Encouraging youth's active participation in community activities
- Providing transportation as needed
- Holding high expectations at home, in school, and for work
- Encouraging participation in self-advocacy activities



Jackie's story



The small town of Luxemburg, where Jackie attends high school, with a population hovering right around 1,900, may not seem like the easiest place for high school students to job hunt.

⁶ Carter, Swedeen, Walter, Moss, & Hsin (in press); Carter, Owens, Trainor, Sun, & Swedeen (2009)

Jackie's story

For students with significant disabilities, this might appear to be an even bigger challenge. But for Jackie, a high school senior, finding a job at McDonald's came fairly easily. And other students with disabilities are exploring their work and career interests with support from their new special education teacher, Cassidy.



Cassidy and most of the students he supports are all new to Luxemburg-Casco High School. He returned to the Midwest after teaching elementary school in Washington, D.C., and until this year, most of his students

attended high school in a neighboring district 15 miles away because the high school didn't offer programming for students with cognitive disabilities.

One of Cassidy's goals as a new transition teacher is to connect every one of his students to a paid job by their senior year. Jackie, whose parents have

always opted for her to attend Luxemburg-Casco High School, is a senior this year and eager to work. Cassidy knew that Jackie wanted to work in retail and that she loved fast food. Looking for something close by that would be within walking distance seemed to make sense.

So he walked half a block up the

street and asked to talk with the local McDonald's manager, Patty.

"She was really receptive and open to the idea of employing one of our students, and she said several afternoon positions were available," said

Cassidy. "It is such a priority for me to get my students placed in the community because as much as I think my classes prepare students for the real world, they fall short when compared to actual work experience."

So within a couple weeks, Cassidy and Jackie walked across the street for her to apply. Jackie disappeared behind the counter and was gone about 10 minutes. During that time, she independently filled out the application and a background check form. She passed the interview with Patty and she soon began working three afternoons each week (from 1-3 p.m.).

Jackie says she loves "everything" about her job, particularly mentioning the people with whom she works. And she knows exactly what to do. When she arrives just before 1 o'clock, she gathers her supplies and performs a series of cleaning and restocking duties. Next, she takes over at the fryer and makes French fries. For the final part of her shift, she waits on customers. While she primarily delivers people their food at the drive-through,

she also takes orders at the front counter and can handle monetary transactions.

Jackie is a pro, mastering most situations at work now, either unassisted or by asking her manager and co-workers. But this wasn't always the case.

Within six weeks of beginning her job, she was experiencing challenges. Patty, the manager, called Cassidy to say that she probably would have to let Jackie go. Jackie was struggling with some customer service skills and seemed confused by the cash register.

Cassidy and Patty connected with Jackie's Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (DVR) counselor, Judy, who had been involved with Jackie as a consultant during IEP meetings. Together, they brainstormed strategies to provide the supports Jackie needed. DVR contracted with a job development agency to provide job coaching at the worksite. Cassidy also decided to provide more targeted



Jackie is a pro, mastering most situations at work now, either unassisted or by asking her manager and co-workers.

Jackie's story

instruction on the skills Jackie needed for her job. At the same time, he worked with Jackie and his other students in the afternoons on a variety of job skills, such as etiquette, making change, and communicating with supervisors. And Patty provided more training using an interactive computer to teach cash register skills.

Within a few weeks, Jackie's job was no longer on the line. Once she had thorough training on each task and the chance to practice, she no longer needed additional supports. In fact, Jackie does all aspects of her job now without supports.

"She does a great job," Patty now says. "She's very good and thorough at cleaning. She's always polite and never talks back—which is great when you're working with teenagers!"

In fact, although the job started as a school work experience Patty has offered to expand her hours for summer. As a dependable employee who already was trained, it would mean less work for Patty as she recruits and hires new summer employees.

Patty is encouraging Jackie to continue through the summer and even increase her hours to work three 4-hour shifts per week. Trying longer work shifts is a goal of Jackie's parents, because she has some physical health concerns. They want to know how her stamina

holds up and better assess her endurance for full-time, permanent work.

Patty also is talking with Jackie about working five days per week instead of three when the next school year starts. Because Jackie can receive school services until she is 21, she can continue to explore different types of work experiences next year instead of focusing exclusively on academic work as part of her transition goals.

During her senior year, Jackie attends inclusive classes in the mornings, including English, social problems, healthy living, and study hall. She has a wide variety of friends at school. And she says her favorite activities outside school are babysitting and hanging out with friends.

During the afternoons in school, Jackie and other students with disabilities work on a variety of transition goals that include career exploration and building awareness of community opportunities. Students perform different in-school jobs, such as stocking, cleaning in the cafeteria's kitchen, and doing laundry for the sports teams. They also grocery shop, plan meals, and

cook; and they volunteer at the local YMCA, nursing home, veterinary hospital, and a day care.

The goals of the program are two-fold: (1) to give students ideas of places they can work, volunteer, and recreate in their community, and (2) to introduce community members to a group of students who had previously spent a most of their school careers outside their home community.

In addition to a variety of class outings and field trips, Cassidy says he works individually with students to explore their strengths and interests as well as talks with them about possible employment options. He sets up day-long job shadows, shorter-term work experiences for school credit, and longer-term placements.

Jackie says she still doesn't know what career options she will pursue in the future. She says she is very happy with her job now, and would love



Jackie has a wide variety of friends at school. Her favorite activities are babysitting and hanging out with friends.



Jackie's story

to expand her hours during the summer. With the support of her school and DVR, she is open to more opportunities that may come up in the future. Her DVR counselor, Judy, hopes that Jackie can both keep her current job and explore new employment options during the next school year with continued school support.



Cassidy agrees that the high school transition years are the perfect time to try a variety of experiences, pointing to supports such as his ability to talk to the McDonald's manager ahead of time and being able to accompany Jackie when she applied, as important in giving students confidence to try new things.

"Having the support of teachers and getting this work experience while in a nurturing environment, such as Luxemburg-Casco (high school), is of the utmost importance, especially because the support system is intact and students' stress levels may be lowered when trying something new (i.e., working)."

Jackie is eligible for long-term supports through her county when she finishes school. That means that she can try other job experiences while still in high school. After leaving school she can receive short-term supports, such as assessment and job coaching, through DVR. Then, the county can pick up the cost of any long term supports that might be needed.

Jackie enjoys her independence on her job now, though. So when she finds a new job sometime in the future, she says learning how to do the work herself without help is her goal.



Factors contributing to Jackie's success

School factors:

- Setting a goal of connecting every student with paid work experiences in the community
- Partnering with the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation
- Working on social and other work-related skills before and during job placements
- Setting up "hands-on" experiences through volunteering and in-school jobs

Employer factors:

- Contacting the school when challenges arise to identify solutions
- Purchasing equipment to help with training
- Willingness to work with school staff and DVR to support the youth

Community factors:

- Having businesses located within walking distance of school, reducing transportation needs
- Making sure students attend school in the communities in which they live

Youth factors:

- Desiring to work
- Possessing awareness of one's own interests and strengths
- Being polite in interactions with others

Family factors:

- Choosing to keep their child in their home district and community through high school
- Encouraging student participation in general education classes with peers





Shelby's story



Understanding yourself and developing your passions can be important to finding and keeping a job. That's what Shelby learned when she began pursuing employment through her strongest passion: baseball.

Shelby has been the "number one fan" of the LaCrosse Loggers college-league baseball team since it formed in 2003, rarely missing a home game even though she lives an hour from the park. Ruth and Dan—co-owners of the team—always made it a point to chat with Shelby and her parents at home games over the years.

So when Shelby approached her 18th birthday and started thinking about her "dream job," working with the Loggers naturally came to mind. Shelby's father, John, approached Ruth about a possible job for Shelby. Ruth was reluctant, but not for the reasons one might think.

"Quite honestly, we get applications all the time from kids who love the Loggers and want to work here," says Ruth, who maintains a workforce of about 70 seasonal employees, most of whom are high school and college students. "But if you work a Loggers game, you'll never see it. We're just too busy. I knew Shelby really loved those games and I didn't want to take that away from her."

But when John persisted and asked Dan again about a job a few weeks later, Dan and Ruth decided to find a spot for Shelby.

"I thought about it and it came to me, maybe we can find things for her to do before the games, so she can work and then still watch the games later," Ruth says. Ruth knew that certain areas of the park could use more attention than employees currently could provide.

She developed a task list and laminated it, listing everything she would expect Shelby to learn to do. She then walked Shelby through every job, demonstrating how to do each one.

"One thing I like about Shelby: she's always happy to do it," Ruth says. "I tell all the kids who work here, 'The customer comes first. You may have had a bad day, but you come in and you be cheerful and happy.' I never had to work on that with Shelby. She just gets it."

Meanwhile, Shelby's mother, Wanda, alerted school staff that Shelby would be starting



One thing I like about Shelby—she's always happy to do the job."

Shelby's story

a paid position in May with the Loggers. Julie, a special education teacher, worked with Shelby toward the end of the school year, foreshadowing the types of expectations employers have for workers and discussing important skills like being responsible and completing tasks thoroughly.

Ruth says she thought the tasks would be a good fit for Shelby, and she was right.

at the park. Shelby wears two shirts to the park: her gold staff shirt on top and her "fan shirt" underneath. This way, at the end of her shift, she can quickly stop in the bathroom and transform herself from employee to Loggers' fan. Ruth explained to Shelby that if she wears her staff shirt during games, fans would think she is still working and might ask her for assistance.

Other than the initial assistance to learn key tasks and Ruth's discussion about when to wear a staff shirt, Shelby needed little other supports. That may be, in part, because she already had performed a variety of unpaid work experiences through her high school, including job shadowing, volunteering, and

unpaid work experiences for school credit. Her teachers, Bob and Julie, set up experiences at a local hospital, a resale store, and an elementary school. Shelby is especially glad they were able to locate a job site

Shelby wanted her mom to stay with her during a shift at first. But within two or three games, she no longer wanted her mother to stay and she didn't need the laminated card. She also worked at the same rate as other employees

with younger children. Shelby's favorite work involves working with babies and toddlers.

The early experiences, Wanda says, helped Shelby learn related skills that are important to successful employment, like taking responsibility and interacting socially with customers and the general public. The specific tasks at the jobs, such as pricing items at the resale shop, also helped strengthen Shelby's math and reading skills.

She describes her life this year, both inside and out of school, as "very busy." In the mornings, she takes academic classes at her high school. In the afternoons, she has a variety of work experiences for credit.

Outside of school, she loves collecting baseball cards, scrapbooking, photography, and baking. Her mother says Shelby has developed lots of interesting, delicious recipes and is very imaginative in creating crafting projects. She also spends time with her two Yorkies—Ottis and Max.

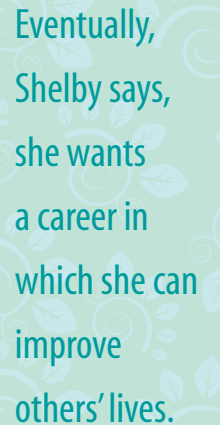
Shelby also is active in sports through Special Olympics year-around, and has assumed leadership roles there. She serves as a volunteer by

helping with fundraisers. These experiences, Wanda says, have further helped Shelby learn organizational and teaming skills, because she works closely with others to organize events. "I want to help people," she says.

On the weekends, Shelby is involved in her church and works with babies and toddlers. This allows Shelby to be a caregiver and give back to others, rather than always being on the receiving end of help. Eventually, Shelby says, she wants a career in which she can improve others' lives, particularly working with schools on anti-bullying and inclusion efforts.

"I love to help others," she says.

Wanda says this comes from years of being bullied and feeling excluded in school. Wanda and John are networking with others to explore ways that Shelby could pursue her dream of working in schools on efforts to include students with disabilities and end discrimination and bullying for all students.



Eventually,
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Shelby's story

"As Shelby's family, we are 100% supportive of Shelby's working outside of and in school, and we are working to help her achieve her dreams for her career," Wanda says.

"I've made lots of friends. I feel comfortable there."

This includes support from her parents in taking her to every home baseball game last season, and from her younger sister, who is eager to hear about Shelby's work successes and cheer her on.

Wanda says that part of the reason the Loggers job has been so important to Shelby, is that her co-workers and the fans are so supportive of her and include her as "one of the gang." That stems from Ruth's emphasis on creating a sense of community and togetherness among the staff. "I always tell the kids at the park that I want this to be more than McDonald's for them. 'I don't want this to be your summer job; I want it to be a summer experience.'"

Shelby and all the seasonal workers are included in staff meetings, and Ruth creates a collage of pictures of the staff working that she frames and gives to each employee at the end of the summer. Of course, Shelby was right in the middle of this year's picture.

"I like being with the people and being around baseball," Shelby says. "I've made lots of friends. I feel comfortable there."

Ruth says Shelby has been such a responsible employee that she would hire her back every summer. She also is confident that Shelby's responsibilities could expand. "I know if I put her in a staff shirt and assigned her to additional tasks, she would know where to go for answers if customers wanted to know where the bathrooms are or if a kid threw up, where to find a clean-up crew. She knows this park inside out and she has good customer service skills,"

But Ruth acknowledges it's completely Shelby's decision. She may not be willing to give up watching those games.



Factors contributing to Shelby's success

School factors:

- Providing job shadowing, volunteer, and in-school work experiences
- Supporting youth in preparing for future work experiences

Employer factors:

- Willing to carve out specific responsibilities and flexible work hours
- Providing hands-on training
- Encouraging a team-based work environment
- Willing to explore additional tasks and responsibilities over time

Youth factors:

- Desiring to work
- Willing to do all tasks requested
- Existing knowledge of work site
- Participating actively in community activities
- Continuing interest in expanding career interests and planning for the future

Family factors:

- Willing and able to provide transportation
- Supporting all types of work experiences and trying different types of work
- Actively encouraging career development and participation in community activities





Matthew's story



Matthew could be considered a pioneer at his northern Wisconsin high school. His reputation for making people smile and affecting the entire climate of the high school is one reason.

But his active participation in general education classes, extracurricular activities, and community organizations is charting a different course for students with significant disabilities in this small town.

Matthew hasn't always been the talkative, outgoing guy he is now. In fact, Matthew did not speak until age 6. His mom, Jane, credits the excellent teachers Matthew has had with helping him learn to speak. The family moved from Kenosha to Rice Lake, Wisconsin, when Matthew was an elementary student. Throughout elementary and middle school, Matthew was primarily in special education classes except for music and art. About four years ago, though, district policies changed to support more inclusive practices. At about this time, Chad became principal at Rice Lake High School and he was committed to ensuring that all staff work together "to meet the needs of all our kids." By not differentiating between regular and special education staff and by focusing on providing appropriate support to all

students, Chad says the school is better meeting all students' needs.

High school French teacher Madame Fox admitted that it was difficult for her to imagine a student with a disability learning a foreign language. Her own father, a veteran teacher who believes in inclusion, urged her to be more open-minded, and Matthew ended up exemplifying the belief that all students have the ability to learn. Matthew's original interest in French stemmed from a desire to go on mission trip with his church to a French-speaking country. Then, as a freshman, one of his classes was next door to Madame Fox's classroom. "We chatted together a lot his freshman year," she says. "Then I thought, 'He needs to take French!'" Matthew has been studying the language and culture now for three years. Madame Fox says he's been wonderful to have in class and, if Matthew is absent, the other students comment



"We chatted together a lot his freshman year, then I thought, 'He needs to take French!'"

Matthew's story

that "It's not the same without Matthew here." Madame Fox speaks highly of Matthew and considers him to be an ambassador. She explains, "The other students in the class can learn a lot from kids like Matt and they do."

Matthew's mother agrees and says, "Matthew is breaking the boundaries to getting other kids in regular education classes." Matthew's principal highlights his "unrelenting positivity" and his drive to do well and accomplish tasks. Chad says Matthew's attitude has helped others realize the potential and contributions all students have to offer.



Matthew brings that same positive attitude to the Arby's fast food restaurant where he works in Rice Lake. In late spring, Matthew and his mom were eating at the restaurant when they saw a "help wanted" sign. Matthew got an application, filled it out with assistance from his mom, and turned it in to the store manager who happened to be a member of their church community. Matthew prepared for a phone and in-person interview by working with Deb, the high school's transition program manager and job developer. Deb arranged for Matthew to chat with the store manager a couple of times before the interview to get comfortable with her and the restaurant environment. He had his interview and was hired a week later.

Deb is instrumental in helping students prepare for work. Her students take a semester-long volunteer work training program through Goodwill. The curriculum includes lessons on safety, first-aid, retail, and diversity, and it provides students with hands-on experiences, such as sorting donations, assisting cashiers,

and bagging. By the end of the semester, the students work in the retail environment every day.

Matthew works at Arby's three days a week for about 2 hours each shift. He works during the lunch rush, greeting customers, stocking condiments and beverages, and keeping the dining room clean.

Matthew likes the new experiences the job offers, and because he thrives on social connections, he loves meeting new people. "After all," he says, "there's a lot of nice people out there."

Matthew knows many customers by name, and his supervisor Melissa gets a lot of positive feedback from the customers about Matthew's work. Melissa, like many co-workers and customers, appreciates Matthew's constant smiles, his positive energy, and his willingness to take on new jobs and ask about tasks that may need to be done. The only thing Matthew doesn't enjoy doing in his job is cleaning windows. But with a little joking and encouragement, Matthew even willingly tackles window washing.

"He's just a joy, so eager to help and pitch in," says Nancy, the high school job paraprofessional who supported Matthew during his first few weeks of work. When Matthew first started his job, he shadowed another employee, and then Deb and Jane helped Matthew create a task sheet with visual cues of the jobs he needed to complete during a shift. To fade her support, Nancy would check in on Matthew after he completed three tasks to see how he was doing and if he had any questions. Each week, she completed an evaluation (created by Deb) of his work-related strengths and challenges, such as staying on task, productivity, and following directions. It quickly became clear that Matthew no longer needed a job coach, and his coworkers at Arby's now answer his questions and provide direction when needed. Everyone helps Matthew when needed by sharing practical tips and reminders to complete tasks. Melissa also notes that Matthew is comfortable asking



"He's just a joy, so eager to help and pitch in."

Matthew's story



if doesn't know how to do something. As these natural supports have developed, Matthew no longer needs the picture task sheet to complete his work.

"Do I look good?" Matthew asks as he gets ready for work, wearing his Arby's uniform of a red shirt, black pants, and hat. He takes pride in his appearance and his work and provides individual service for customers as he cleans

the tables. He notices when other restaurants aren't meeting the same standards he has at Arby's. While eating at a different restaurant recently, Matthew noticed that the dining room was a

mess. "They need me to take care of it!" he exclaimed.

While Matthew enjoys and excels at his job at Arby's, he does not plan to work there forever. He will be graduating this year and has entrepreneurial dreams for his future. When Matthew was a freshman, he joined his classmates in a fundraiser for

the local humane society. It turns out Matthew is a natural salesman. He chats easily with everyone and makes people feel good with his sincere compliments and humorous comments.

This sales experience led to a long-term goal of becoming an entrepreneur and owning a 4-wheeler park with a campground that is close to trails. "It's for people who like to go fast," Matthew explains. His parents, who strive to listen to Matthew and honor his choices instead of focusing on his disability, are supporting his goal. They are looking for a mentor, learning about small business loans, and searching for property. To teach Matthew about running a business, his parents suggested that he take a marketing class at school.

When Matthew enrolled in the marketing class, his teacher, Dennis, did not have much experience teaching students with significant disabilities. The experiential, hands-on aspects of the course work well for Matthew. The class takes frequent field trips to businesses to see how the organization

runs. Accommodating the in-class coursework was more challenging, though. Dennis, Deb, Jane, and Sue, the special education coordinator,

worked together to brainstorm ways for Matthew to learn the course content. Jane pointed out that because Matthew does not read or write very much, it is not necessary for Matthew to learn all the vocabulary and every concept, but she wanted him to learn the basics. The team developed projects

for Matthew to complete that would help teach him these basic marketing concepts. Matthew has now taken the class two times to reinforce concepts, and, according to Jane, "Dennis loves him."

Matthew also is gaining increased independence in his classes. In previous classes, a paraprofessional accompanied Matthew on field trips to make sure he stayed with the group. But for field trips in Dennis's class, there are no paraprofessionals. Jane was worried about Matthew's

safety, but the other students in the class stepped up. Without being asked, one young man told Matthew and



his brother that he'd keep an eye out for him. The trip was a complete success.

"The kids just get it. They provide natural supports without being asked," Jane explains. Since Jane is a parent liaison for the district, she is at the school regularly and observes peer interactions. "All kids here are treated similarly and they pick up on that," she says. She adds that they include Matthew and joke around with him just like they do any other kid.

He will be graduating this year and has entrepreneurial dreams for his future.

Matthew's story

A classmate who attends Matthew's church talked about where that attitude comes from. "All kids should have the same opportunities and no one should be excluded just because of a disability," Evan said.

Matthew's desire to fit in has helped forge the way for other students with disabilities.

He wants to be in general education classes, and he participates in all kinds of school activities like pep rallies and working as a student office runner. Deb explained that other students who receive special education services are now participating more fully in school. Some students are taking classes like French, Spanish, and marketing, and many are also involved in clubs and other extracurricular activities.

Another strength Matthew brings is his knowledge of his own limitations, including knowing when to ask for help. "He solves problems by connecting with people and networking. He is skilled at working a room," says Madame Fox. Likewise, he already knows that he will need to hire a landscaper for his future 4-wheeler park, so when he was interviewed for this story, he asked, "Do you know any landscapers?"

Matthew's schedule is busy. He arrives at school for an 8 a.m. class, and on days when he works, he eats lunch around 10:45 to catch the school bus to Arby's. After his shift, he takes the bus back to school for his last class. During the summer, Matthew continues to work for Arby's and gets a ride to and from work from his family.

After school, Matthew's commitments continue. Once a week, he volunteers for one hour at Lakeview Medical where he completes administrative tasks like putting labels on envelopes, folding brochures, and putting packets together for

mailings. Tammy, the volunteer coordinator, says that the work Matthew does takes a lot of time and frees employees to complete other tasks. Besides his willingness to stay late to finish time sensitive administrative tasks, Melissa, one of his coworkers, explains that Matthew's positive attitude contributes greatly to the office environment: "If you're having a bad day, Matthew makes you laugh," she says.

On Wednesdays, he attends a youth group with other teens from his church, getting help from them when needed. He also serves at the church doing various jobs. He helps with the children's ministry and coordinates a Milk Moola project by cutting labels off containers and sorting caps to turn in for money. If he needs support, he can turn to other members of the congregation.

Jane attributes much of Matthew's success at school, at work, and in the community to having the same opportunities as his peers to participate in general education, as well as the school and community activities of his choice. These many opportunities have allowed him to gain useful employment and life experience that put his future dreams within reach.

Deb agrees, "It's just so amazing to see how many skills he has gained. He has really benefited from all the experiences and training he has had throughout high school."

Jane and Matthew's family are extremely proud of him and all that he has accomplished: "Our family feels very blessed to have Matthew become the young man he has."



"It's just so amazing to see how many skills he has gained."



Factors contributing to Matthew's success

School factors:

- Providing adequate coaching supports to attain and learn the job
- Fading paid supports appropriately
- Providing inclusive classes and extracurricular opportunities with peers to meet new friends and explore interests⁷
- Providing transportation to and from job during the academic year
- Having school leadership committed to inclusive programming and extracurricular activities
- Using a team-teaching approach to providing meaningful coursework modifications
- Offering short-term work training as part of the transition program

Employer factors:

- Committing to hiring a diverse workforce
- Willing to meet with applicant before job interview to increase applicant's comfort
- Encouraging a team-based work environment

Community factors:

- Regular patrons at restaurant who get to know and appreciate staff
- Small town size increases likelihood that social networks are inter-connected

Youth factors:

- Being motivated to work
- Having a positive outlook
- Having a friendly, outgoing personality
- Being a thorough worker
- Participating actively in community activities

Family factors:

- Providing transportation during the summer
- Listening to youth's goals and dreams
- Investigating next steps for achieving long-term goals
- Encouraging and supporting youth's community involvement
- Encouraging youth to take classes that will prepare for future endeavors
- Working collaboratively with school to ensure access to and appropriate accommodations in all school classes and activities

Summary

Paid work experiences during high school can have a substantial impact on the lives of youth with significant disabilities. But youth are certainly not the only ones who benefit from these experiences. All six stories speak to the important contributions these youth made to their workplaces. Employers gain a committed and hard-working employee, co-workers benefit from having the opportunity to develop relationships with their peers with disabilities, and customers see youth with disabilities in a different light, as valued and contributing members of their community. When youth are encouraged and supported to participate in the everyday life of their community, everyone benefits.

Our goal in sharing these stories is to encourage schools, employers, families, and communities to hold high expectations for youth with significant disabilities and to consider how they might draw more heavily on the natural supports that already exist in every community. Every young person—with and without

disabilities—should have the opportunities and supports needed to pursue meaningful work. We hope these stories will help you catch a glimpse of what is possible.

To learn more about expanding and supporting opportunities for youth in their schools and communities, please visit our website at www.waisman.wisc.edu/naturalsupports/. Our Natural Supports project aims to discover, support, and disseminate creative and promising approaches for supporting youth with disabilities to participate more fully and naturally in school, work, and community activities. We welcome you to access and use our stories, resources, guides, and research briefs found on our website.



Every young person—with and without disabilities—should have the opportunities and supports needed to pursue meaningful work.

⁷ Carter, Swedeen, & Kurkowski (2008)

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