

# Impact

**Feature Issue on Employment and Women With Disabilities**

Published by the Institute on Community Integration (UCEDD) • Research and Training Center on Community Living

Volume 21 • Number 1 • Summer/Fall 2008



Carol Ely meets with a co-worker in her office at the University of Minnesota. See story below.

## **“Get It in Your Head:” My Grandmother’s Advice Was Right**

by Carol Ely

For as long as I can remember, I have been encouraged to achieve. In my family, particularly on my mother’s side, that meant to go to school and “get it in your head,” one of my grandmother’s favorite sayings. She believed that no one could take away whatever you had learned, not even Whites who, in her experience, so often wanted people of color to have less than they had, and be less than they were. I did not know until after her death that she had once been a teacher in a one-room school, which explains why she always wanted to check my spelling or my math homework when I was in elementary school.

I felt I had a lot to live up to. There were a number of teachers, principals, social workers, and other college educated/ graduate school persons in the family to aspire to be like, and sometimes that made me nervous! However, I have known for a long time that the hardest expectations to live up to are often your own. Early in life I got the message that I would have to deal with “triple jeopardy,” being an African American, a person with a disability, and a female. Therefore, because of any or all of these circumstances, I would have to prove myself many times over...try a little harder, be a little smarter than those around me. The best way to do this, according to my family, was to stay in school, as it was obvious that I would not be able to do manual labor.

Of course, life did not go exactly as I had expected that it would. I thought that as

*[Ely, continued on page 34]*

## **From the Editors**

*Why is work important to women with disabilities? Well, for the women profiled in this Impact there are a lot of reasons. Among them are feeling successful and important, earning money, being independent, having a reason to get up in the morning, making a meaningful difference in the lives of others, learning new things, following a sense of calling, and achieving goals. At the same time, it is also true that fewer women with disabilities participate in the workforce than men with disabilities or women without disabilities. All the reasons for this difference are not entirely clear. One of the things we do know is that the expectations that people have of women with disabilities play a role in their participation in the workforce. We also know that awareness of a range of employment strategies and options on the part of professionals opens up possibilities that may otherwise be overlooked. And we know that having role models and mentors makes all the difference in the world for girls and women with disabilities as they think about what they want to do with their adult lives. Because having meaningful, valued work is such an important part of life, we hope through this Impact to encourage readers to hold an expansive vision of what’s possible for women with disabilities in the employment arena, and to offer strategies, resources, and inspiration to realize that vision.*

## **What’s Inside**

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Personal Profiles  
Resources*

**COLLEGE OF EDUCATION  
+ HUMAN DEVELOPMENT**

**UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA**

## What Work Means to Me: Some Thoughts From Women With Disabilities

*What does having a job mean in the lives of women with disabilities? We asked 10 women with disabilities who work in a range of jobs common to many communities to talk about why their work is important to them. Below are their responses.*

- I work so I can be independent, and live by myself, and show others that I can do it. I want to pay taxes and contribute to my country. My job is also important to me because I make money and can buy groceries, and I enjoy being a part of a social group with my co-workers, who I can talk to. I like to learn new skills and working helps me do this. – *Desirae, Busser at Perkins Restaurant*

***I work so I can be independent, and live by myself, and show others that I can do it. I want to pay taxes and contribute to my country.***

- As a woman with a disability, my job is important to me. I am happy and proud to say I have been gainfully employed for 19 years. In 1989, I became employed with Arthur Andersen accounting firm as an accounting clerk. This was my first job out of high school. Needless to say, I was very excited. In April of 1998 I found out that my job was going to be outsourced and I would no longer have a job. I knew that I couldn't be without a job. I got connected with Access to Employment and started job searching again. After a few interviews and disappointments, I got another job with a law firm as an accounting file clerk. Today, I am still

employed there. I was promoted to accounts receivable assistant in 2003.

Growing up with cerebral palsy I thought I wouldn't be able to hold down a "real" job. I knew that having a disability was a challenge unto itself. I thought I would be doing "piece mail" type work. Little did I know that I *can* hold down a real job – for 19 years! – *Amy, Accounts Receivable Assistant, Law Firm*

- In our society, we identify ourselves in many ways. One way is the work we do. People often ask what do you do on your job? This gives us a sense of importance and belonging. To me, I fall into this group. But I also have a job working with people with disabilities. I assess and train individuals on assistive technology and computer usage. This gives me a sense of giving back to the community. Additionally, I pride myself in being able to be completely financially independent. – *Jeni, Lead Assistive Technology Specialist, Courage Center*
- I am the very first contact people have with our law firm! I could "make" or "break" a (potentially) new client's first impression! My position here may not be what I had in mind while I was in college working towards my BSW degree and my Psychology minor, but I have met some amazing/fascinating people here who have been very good to me! It feels good to accomplish something at the end of each day, to have been able to help others get the help they need. I perform a wide variety of tasks throughout the day, assisting with anything from paralegal projects, to marketing projects, to answering the firm's switchboard. My peers have accepted me and my service dogs with open arms and don't see me any differently than they do any other one of their peers.

I may not be utilizing my Social Work degree the way I had planned, but I also can't imagine working for a better place. It's been an exciting 17 years with this firm! – *Angelita, Switchboard Operator, Law Firm*

***Growing up with cerebral palsy I thought I wouldn't be able to hold down a "real" job. Little did I know that I can hold down a real job – for 19 years!***

- I work at MacDonald's and I have been there for 23 years! I like to work so I can pay my rent, buy clothing and grooming items out of my own pocket, and use my own checkbook. I am going to buy a tall stereo with speakers and a converter for my TV for the conversion in February 2009. I started working shorter shifts and only Monday through Friday because it's less stressful. I get asked to stay late if short-handed or when people call in sick. I do many things at MacDonald's, like greet customers, clean the lobby, cook french fries and buns, put pies in the oven and then into boxes, and other cleaning. I like the variety. – *Jane, Food Service Staff, MacDonald's*
- My job entails three main things: advocacy at the state Capitol during the legislative session to make sure election laws are inclusive of people with disabilities; providing voter education and training throughout the state; and election protection efforts leading up to election day. I've collaborated extensively with many

disability organizations and other non-profits on voting rights issues and election matters. I truly enjoy the work that I do. It is exciting, creative and fascinating all at once. Working on election issues and voting rights has taught me so much about the history of our democracy, equality, and the value of being an active participant in our political process. I've met so many people from all walks of life who work hard to promote and improve our democratic process.  
– *Mai, Voting Outreach Advocate, Minnesota Disability Law Center*

- Not working makes me kind of depressed. When I don't have anything going on during the day, I like to sleep, watch TV and go for walks, which sounds kind of boring. My job coach got me an application from Hardee's and helped me fill it out, and I got the job. She came in and supervised me until I got the knack of it. Working brings up my self-esteem because I know when I'm helping people out I'm making friends and showing other employees I'm capable of doing stuff and do a good job. I want to feel successful and

*Not working makes me kind of depressed. I want to feel successful and important, and when I'm working I feel important.*

important, and when I'm working I feel important. I think it's a lot harder for a woman with disabilities to get employment because of certain limitations and employers aren't very lenient. But when I needed something at Hardee's, I just asked. For instance, they made a special stool so I could reach higher shelves,

and later they added lower shelves. It made it easier to do my job. And I brought my own lunch because of my diabetes, and they allowed me another break. – *Linda, Lobby Attendant, Hardee's Restaurant*

- At JC Penney I hang up clothes in the stockroom. I used to be in the fitting rooms putting clothes back on the racks. If I don't work I get depressed. I'm tired of doing day programs. I got to meet quite a few different kinds of people, including a special friend, at JC Penney. – *Peggy, Retail Staff, JC Penney*

- My job provides me with a purpose and a reason to get up every day. I work with students with disabilities at the University, and as a person with a disability myself it is particularly fulfilling to get to serve as a mentor to others. I really enjoy hearing the success stories that students share with me.

I also get to work with faculty and staff in arranging for accommodations for people with disabilities and I realize what an incredible, committed group of people we have here. I love that my job involves assisting others with disabilities to obtain an education. – *Linda, Manager of Student Services, Disability Services, University of Minnesota*

- My job is important to make a living, to save money to find a place of my own, to be able to have money for basic needs, and to help other people with disabilities speak up for themselves by being a role model for them. – *Carol, Clean-up Crew Member, Vocational Agency Contract Services Division*

## Resources: Telling the Stories of Women With Disabilities

• **Beyond Disability.** A 26-minute video produced by The Empowered Fe Fes (slang for female), a group of young women with disabilities who hit the streets of Chicago on a quest to discover the difference between how they see themselves and how others see them. They grapple with issues of access, education, employment, sexuality and growing up with disabilities. Available from Beyondmedia Education, Chicago. For a preview and ordering information go to [www.beyondmedia.org](http://www.beyondmedia.org) or call 773/857-7300.

• **Proyecto Visión (www.proyectovision.net).** On this bilingual Web site for Latinos with disabilities are over 50 profiles of Latina women who have successfully gained employment, advanced in their careers, achieved educational goals, and become community leaders. The profiles (under "Success Stories") include "Dana's Story," an online video story of a woman born with no arms and legs who has earned a Bachelor's degree in Mechanical Engineering, and is in her 14th year of employment as an engineer with NASA.

• **A Life of Choices: Betsy's Story.** Leading a full life with a disability requires a family working together. "Betsy's Story" features the success possible when a child with cerebral palsy grows up in a supportive and inclusive world. Betsy pushes boundaries, defies limitations and challenges barriers to seek the same joys, responsibilities, and roles as peers without disabilities. The video illustrates her transition from high school to college and then to a professional career. Available from the Institute on Human Development and Disability, University of Georgia, [www.ihdd.uga.edu/Resources/Resources-Videos-CDs.html](http://www.ihdd.uga.edu/Resources/Resources-Videos-CDs.html), or 706/542-3457.



# What Do We Know, and Not Know, About Women With Disabilities in the Workforce?

by Bonnie O'Day and Susan Foley

Roughly 21 million women (15.6% of all women) in the United States have a disability. For women ages 21-64 – the years during which people are most likely to be employed – about 13%, or 11 million, have a disability (Rehabilitation Research and Training Center on Disability Demographics and Statistics, 2007). What do we know about the relationship between disability and employment for those women with disabilities who are employed and those who are not? Unfortunately, not enough. Many questions about the connections between gender, race, poverty and employment for women with disabilities have not yet been sufficiently studied and answered. In the remainder of this article, we'll describe some of the data that are available, and suggest some areas in which further exploration is needed.

## Differences in Work Participation

Fewer women with disabilities (34.5%) work for pay or in a family business 15 hours or more per week than do men with or without disabilities (41.9% and 85.6% respectively), or women without disabilities (71.2%) (Rehabilitation Research and Training Center on Disability Demographics and Statistics, 2007). Men and women with sensory disabilities, including vision and hearing impairment, are the group that most often works, followed by individuals with physical, mental, and self-care disabilities (see Table 1). And in all these categories the percent of women with disabilities working ranges from 11% to 1.5% less than the percent of men with disabilities.

Among questions this data raises are:

- In what ways is gender a factor in employment participation among people with disabilities?
- Why are there greater gender differences in workforce participation

between men and women with sensory impairments than between men and women with other types of disabilities?

- Are women with disabilities facing different work barriers or expectations about workforce participation than their male peers?
- Do family and child-rearing commitments affect employment participation for women with disabilities differently than for men with disabilities?

These and additional questions about differences in workforce participation need to be more thoroughly investigated to better understand what might help or hinder women with disabilities from obtaining employment.

## Poverty and Women

The lower employment rate of women with disabilities most likely contributes to differences in poverty rates. About 31% of women with a work limitation live in households below the poverty level, as compared to about 26% of men with a work limitation (U.S. Census Bureau, 2004).<sup>1</sup> Numerous researchers agree that disability rates among single mothers in poverty are very high (Acs & Loprest, 2004; Foley, Marrone & Simon, 2002). Women in poverty may find themselves

**Table 1: Employment of Non-Institutionalized Working Age (21-64) Men and Women With Disabilities in the U.S.: Percent Employed More Than 15 Hours Weekly, by Disability Status**

<u>Disability</u>	<u>Men</u>	<u>Women</u>
No Disability	85.6	71.2
Any Disability	41.9	34.5
Sensory	52.6	41.2
Physical	33.6	30.7
Mental	31.8	26.5
Disability Affecting Self-Care	18.0	16.5
Disability Affecting Going Outside Home	18.2	15.5
Disability Affecting Employment	19.2	16.4

Data from American Community Survey (2006)

caught between conflicting policy inducements that work at cross purposes, such as TANF work requirements and SSI work disincentives, or at the very least, policies that do not intersect to enable this population to work. For example, disability employment programs do not routinely provide childcare assistance, while welfare systems are only recently addressing disability in the search for work (Foley, Marrone & Simon, 2002). Lustig and Strauser (2004) make recommendations to rehabilitation counselors about

**Table 2: Employment of Non-Institutionalized Working Age (21-64) Men and Women With and Without Disabilities in the U.S.: Percent Employed, by Education Level**

<u>Education</u>	<u>Men with Disabilities</u>	<u>Men without Disabilities</u>	<u>Women with Disabilities</u>	<u>Women without Disabilities</u>
< High School	29.3	79.4	19.8	50.4
HS Graduate	40.9	84.4	32.2	68.1
Some College or Associates Degree	47.5	85.6	41.5	74.5
BA or Higher	58.3	89.4	52.4	77.7

Data from American Community Survey (2006)

**Table 3: Employment of Non-Institutionalized Working Age (21-64) Men and Women With and Without Disabilities in the U.S.: Percent Employed, by Race and Ethnicity**

Race/Ethnicity	Men with Disabilities	Men without Disabilities	Women with Disabilities	Women without Disabilities
White	43.8	87.1	35.5	72.3
Black or African American	29.8	77.7	30.3	72.9
Native American Alaska Native, or Both	36.8	77.7	31.1	66.2
Asian	46.9	80.8	36.3	64.1
Native Hawaiian, Pacific Islander	43.5	81.0	41.9	70.0
Hispanic	45.1	86.2	31.7	61.2
Non-Hispanic	41.5	85.5	34.8	72.8

Data from American Community Survey (2006)

addressing the livable wage for workers with disabilities who despite working remain in poverty. They suggest that the evaluation of successful employment outcomes should consider community standards for livable wages and that rehabilitation systems should invest in human capital activities to promote marketable skills.

Questions for further exploration that are suggested by the data we have about poverty and women with disabilities include:

- To what extent are women with disabilities supported to gain marketable skills that promote economic advancement?
- How do welfare policies influence disability policies in the everyday lives of women with disabilities in poverty?
- Do rehabilitation programs consider the needs of women with disabilities who are mothers?

**Education a Factor**

A woman’s level of education influences her chances of employment. Only one-fifth of women with disabilities who

have less than a high school education are employed, as compared to over half of female college graduates with a disability. Table 2 shows that education appears to be more strongly correlated with employment for women with disabilities than other groups. College educated women with disabilities are much more likely to work than women with disabilities with less than a high school education. They also have less disparity in employment rates with their non-disabled peers than any other educational group. This reinforces the idea that education helps create equity in employment.

Some of the unanswered questions about the connection between education and employment for women with disabilities include:

- In what ways does education create equity in employment rates?
- What are the specific practices that improve college attendance and college success for women with disabilities? Are these practices similar across disability groups?
- Although there is more parity at higher education levels, significant

gaps remain. What ameliorates employment barriers for college-educated women with disabilities?

**Race and Ethnicity**

Patterns of work appear to differ when comparing racial and ethnic subpopulations (see Table 3). Asian and Hawaiian/Pacific Islander women with disabilities have higher employment rates than any other group of women with disabilities. This differs from their non-disabled female peers. African-American women with disabilities have slightly higher employment rates than their male peers, in contrast to African American women without disabilities, whose rates are lower than their male peers. African-American, Native American, and Hispanic women with disabilities have consistently lower rates of employment than other racial and ethnic groups among women with disabilities. Hispanic men with disabilities have one of the higher rates of employment among men with disabilities. The factors that contribute to all these differences are not well understood. To uncover the racial and ethnic implications of employment outcomes of women with disabilities researchers should include race, ethnicity, and gender as factors in determining the relationship between disability and employment rates. In order to do this, they need to pay adequate attention to sampling procedures. Some questions for further exploration are:

- Why does gender factor differently in employment rates of subpopulations of race and ethnicity?
- What improves the employment rate of African American men and women with disabilities?

**Occupational Clusters**

Table 4 shows that women tend to be clustered in occupations, whether by choice or not, in very different ways than men. Nearly half of women, regardless of disability status, are working in either

*[O’Day and Foley, continued on page 35]*

## ***Becoming the Ones We've Been Waiting For: A Story of Work, Community, and Change***

by Kathy Martinez

I come from a large family of Latino and Native American heritage. My parents did not have much formal education, and their English skills were still poor when I was growing up. Their experience with disability was limited to elderly relatives and neighbors. When I was eight months old, they discovered that I'd probably never be able to see. Both parents felt an overwhelming sense of self-blame, guilt, helplessness and fear for their child. This reaction is almost inevitable given the

***Other than my sister, I didn't meet another blind person of color until I was pretty old – around 18 or 19.***

social stigma, isolation, and misinformation about disabilities in the larger society. Additionally, like many parents from communities of color, my parents knew instinctively that as a Latina and a person with a disability I would experience many layers of barriers and would have to struggle much harder to cut through those if I were to survive (much less, thrive) in the mainstream society.

I was mainstreamed from kindergarten through high school. Now, something important to point out here is that I have a blind sister – for which I am eternally grateful. Although having a second child with a disability was very hard on my parents initially, for me it was very good. She was my touchstone. For example, we shared a secret mode of communication using the position of the Braille dots to spell words out to each other. We also benefited from each other's experience as blind people. We strategized together about how to approach the world.

Although I was vaguely aware of

being different at a younger age, when I started kindergarten the experience of being surrounded by kids who could get from one end of the playground to another without crashing into bikes, toys and/or other kids made me fully realize that I was REALLY different. I realized then that I would have to survive differently than most kids and employ different strategies to get through life.

One of the most powerful, although painful, lessons from my school years was that being mainstreamed helped me to hold higher expectations for myself because of the expectations of other children. The other children at my school held me accountable to the highest expectations and let me know the soonest when I let them down. They were cruel, incredibly inventive, and compassionate. While they demanded a lot, they also gave a lot (mostly without condition). For example, some kids would sneak by me quietly to avoid me while others would tell me they did so. Other kids invented alternate versions of tennis, badminton, and volleyball so I could participate. They also gave advice such as reminding me to look directly at a person when speaking to them, and a lot of advice about color, fashion, and style. Mastering and demonstrating these "soft skills" helped me to "assimilate" to the larger culture, which my parents wanted Peggy and me to do as much as possible so that we would have more opportunities open to us. They had learned this painful lesson through their own experience as Latinos in predominantly white environments.

While a teenager, I was involved in both the women's movement and the farm workers movement. Experiences in these social justice environments began to shape my sense of purpose in life – meaning that many of my political ideals were formed and I learned a lot about working with different types of people

on a daily basis. I honestly never felt completely "included," though. Organizers of those movements very often found it difficult to get past my blindness and truly utilize the skills they had been so critical in developing in me.

So, in April of 1977 when handed a Braille flyer about a civil rights protest being held in San Francisco by people with disabilities, I had no doubt I had to attend. This event, bringing together hundreds of people with every imaginable disability, and their allies, was the critical development that landed me in the midst of the emerging disability rights movement led in Berkeley by such luminaries as Ed Roberts, Judy Heumann and Gerald Baptiste, an African American, blind advocate working for the Berkeley Center for Independent Living. As a Latina, I was so impressed to see such a varied mix of ethnicities, ages, races and disability types, as well as support from

***This year I turned 50, and at this time in my life I feel that those of us who are older have a responsibility to be mentors and role models for younger women with disabilities.***

the broader civil rights community. The empowerment, connections, and sense of wholeness from this experience have been a vital part of my own educational and career development.

While on the one hand experiencing that sense of empowerment through involvement in the disability rights movement, I also found that for blind people



in that era there were very few employment opportunities for which to prepare. A blind woman could be a rehabilitation counselor, telephone operator, or typist in a typing pool. When I was being assessed by career counselors for the blind during my high school years, I was channeled toward factory types of jobs and ended up getting a job in a lock factory. I was not tracked into the typical jobs for a



blind woman because the rehab counselor, knowing I was a Latina, assumed I was a migrant worker, moved around a lot, and wouldn't stay long at a job. Instead I was placed in a rather dangerous work environment where a person with a disability would probably never be placed today: I ran a punch press.

My horizons broadened after high school when I had the opportunity to live in Japan for two months as part of a youth exchange program, to travel to Nicaragua to do organizing for disability rights, and to live in Mexico for awhile. These experiences exposed me to the realities of most disabled people in developing countries: no sidewalks, no transportation, no services, and no awareness of disability as a social issue. The opportunity to get out of the States and experience different cultural values, beliefs and

approaches to disability helped me understand my own struggle in the United States where so much emphasis is placed on individuality and independence, and further developed my commitment to disability rights.

Subsequently I worked as the director of blind services for the Center for Independent Living (CIL) in Berkeley, which taught me to work on a daily basis with people with other types of disabilities. Since the concepts of "accommodations" and "personal assistance" were still more on paper than available in the workplace, CIL employees created their own symbiotic support systems, such as blind people carrying out physical tasks, and workers with physical disabilities serving as readers or guides.

In 1988, I entered college at San Francisco State University. My sister and I became the first in our family to pursue postsecondary education, largely because we couldn't perform most blue collar jobs. I graduated with a degree in Speech and Communication Studies. Through my experience in community organizing I had found that I was good at connecting people, communicating with people, and I really enjoyed it. I found meaning in bringing about change through bringing people together. So I chose communication as a degree – though I didn't have a specific career goal in mind.

After graduation, I was hired by the World Institute on Disability (WID) as a Project Assistant with their AIDS project. WID is one of the first U.S.-based, disability-led organizations to promote the independent living philosophy and policies worldwide, and my role was to help build a link between the AIDS community and the disability rights community. Since 2005, I have been serving as the organization's Executive Director. Today my job involves everything from staff supervision to project management and fundraising. In addition, I direct Proyecto Visión, the national technical assistance center to increase employment opportunities for Latinos with disabilities; Access to Assets, an initiative to help reduce poverty among people with disabilities; "Nobody Left Behind," a national project

to increase the capacity of the Red Cross to integrate people with disabilities within their disaster response procedures; and a series of projects in the governmental and private sectors to promote disability competency. In 2002, I was appointed by President Bush to the National Council on Disability, an independent federal agency advising the President and Congress on disability policy. Three years later I was selected a public member of the newly-established State Department advisory committee on disability and foreign policy, and in 2007 I was appointed a board member of the U.S. Institute of Peace, a Congressionally-created agency dedicated to research and projects in conflict management.

This year I turned 50, and at this time in my life I feel that those of us who are older have a responsibility to be mentors and role models for younger women with disabilities. Other than my sister, I didn't meet another blind person of color until I was pretty old – around 18 or 19. It's embarrassing to admit, but when I met my first female disabled person of color role model I had low expectations of her, and expected something to be "wrong" with her. I was pleasantly surprised when she turned out to be connected to her culture and comfortable with her disability. My advice to other older women with disabilities is to look for ways to support the younger women who are beginning their adult and work lives. And I would encourage younger women to seek out mentors and role models in the multiple communities of which you're a part, because disability is not our only source of identity. We are part of many communities and need to connect with them, make our place in them, and, when necessary, help expand people's comfort level with us by being in their midst and sharing our common commitments.

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## Role Models, Mentors, and Muses for Women With Disabilities

by Harilyn Rousso

For all women, access to female role models and mentors – other women successful in the world of work who share their expertise – is an important employment strategy. Role models and mentors offer women seeking jobs or career advancement inspiration, support, guidance, contacts, and concrete evidence that women can survive and thrive in the workplace despite the barriers. At best, successfully employed women can also enable other women to discover their creative forces within and develop their full potential; in this respect, they can serve as muses.

*If you were asked to identify 10 women with disabilities who had made substantial contributions to society, how many women besides Helen Keller could you name?*

For women with disabilities, contact with role models, mentors and muses who are both female and disabled is particularly important. Stereotypes – images of women with disabilities as sick, helpless, incompetent – suggest we cannot work. Our low employment rate suggests we do not work. Yet we can and we do. Successful women with disabilities show how.

### **The Invisibility of Role Models**

If you were asked to identify 10 women with disabilities who had made substantial contributions to society historically or currently, how many women besides Helen Keller could you name? If you

could now add famous men with disabilities to the list, would the task be any easier? Although there are many famous women with disabilities – such as Alicia Alonso, Annie Jump Cannon, Temple Grandin, Dorothea Lange, Frida Kahlo, Wilma Mankiller, Wilma Rudolph and Harriet Tubman – their disability status is rarely acknowledged. The exceptions are women like Helen Keller who are best known for “overcoming” their disability. Helen Keller was a suffragette, socialist, and disability activist, among other things, yet those aspects of her life are rarely included in textbooks. Why must disability status either be denied or overcome?

Because of negative societal attitudes surrounding disability – the pervasive perception that people with disabilities are sick, helpless, dependent, childlike and asexual – women with disabilities who are successful are no longer perceived as disabled. In people’s minds, disability and success seem incompatible. Rarely is disability seen as an asset or even an acceptable part of one’s identity.

While this problem of incompatible images exists for people with disabilities in general, it is even more intense for women. Until relatively recently, the images of “womanhood” and “success” seemed incompatible. Successful women were perceived as manlike, seeking a career because they could not “catch a man,” because they were not “true women.” This has changed to some degree, but powerful women continue to make many people quite uncomfortable. Thus, successful women with disabilities are often seen not only as not having a disability, but also as not truly women. For women of color with disabilities, lesbians with disabilities, and women with disabilities who are members of other oppressed groups, there are additional layers of stereotypes that are incompatible with success.

As a result, women and girls with

disabilities are denied access to the positive role models that they need to set positive, realistic expectations and to make expansive educational, vocational and social choices. Scholars Michelle Fine and Adrienne Asch, in a landmark paper on women with disabilities (1981), noted that because of the various myths and stereotypes about women with disabilities, there are few socially sanctioned roles for them to fill. They are perceived as inadequate to fulfill either the nurturing reproductive roles of wife and mother, the traditional roles reserved for women, or the economically productive roles of breadwinner considered appropriate for men. As a result, they experience rolelessness, a lack of clarity about who and what to be and to become. This lack of socially acceptable roles is a severely limiting condition in the lives of women with disabilities, often more limiting than the disability itself. It contributes to the difficulty that women with disabilities face as they seek to enter the world of work.

In the absence of role models, stereotypes prevail, whereas in the presence of role models, stereotypes can be challenged and replaced by positive images. Below is an example of how role models were transforming for me.

### **The Power of Role Models: A Personal Account**

I was born with cerebral palsy, which affects my walking, fine motor coordination, and speech. When I was growing up, I did not know any children or adults with disabilities. Partly this was because I attended regular public school, where I was the only student with a disability. But also, I think I tried to stay away from other people who had disabilities, to avoid them. My disability had caused me so many painful experiences, people teasing, staring, disliking me because of



the disability. So I did not want to be associated with the very characteristic that had caused me such distress. It never occurred to me that there might be people with disabilities out there who were interesting, smart, attractive, funny, successful. At least I had never met any.

When I was 22, I had an unexpected, important experience. I worked one summer for a prominent economist who happened to have cerebral palsy. I was astonished when I met her at the job interview. It was a bit like looking at myself. Betty had quite a powerful effect on me. I was impressed that a woman with cerebral palsy, not a very socially acceptable disability, could make it in a man's field. Another thing that impressed me, perhaps more than the first, was that she was married. That amazed me. When I was growing up, my parents and I believed that if you had a disability, you couldn't date, marry or have children. So I totally put aside any hope of a social life and concentrated on my studies. Betty's lifestyle, her marriage to an interesting, dynamic man, made me reconsider the negative assumptions I had made about my social potential. She planted the seeds of positive possibilities that continued to grow throughout my life.

Later on, when I decided to become a psychotherapist, I again realized how helpful it could be to network with other people with disabilities. At one point I was asked to leave a postgraduate psychoanalytic institute because some of the faculty did not think that a person with cerebral palsy could become a therapist. This was the most blatant example of discrimination I had ever faced. I was shocked and distressed, and began looking for other therapists with disabilities who had made it. Their support enabled me to stay in the field – and begin a lawsuit against the institute.

Both these experiences convinced me of the power of role models, and later on inspired me to start a mentoring and role model program for adolescent girls with disabilities.

### **More Than Role Models: Mentors and Muses**

Although I described Betty as a role model, she was actually more than that to me. She was a combination of a role model, mentor and muse, not to mention a dear friend. While there is some overlap in the first three terms, there are also some differences. Let me explain what I mean.

A "role model" is someone with impressive qualities or achievements that another person admires. Role models by their very presence offer the hopeful message "You can be like me." But role models can sometimes unintentionally communicate "You must be like me" rather than encouraging the admirer to become her own person. Role models are important, but may not be enough.

"Mentor" is a term that dates back to the story of Odysseus in Greek mythology, who put his son in the hands of his trusted friend Mentor to serve as parent, teacher, guide and counselor to the boy when Odysseus went off to fight the Trojan War. Drawing on this model, the mentor role can include teaching, guidance, advice and encouragement, at best fostering the notion of "I will help you be whoever you wish to be."

Some feminist literature suggests that because mentoring was originally derived from a relationship between males, it might not fully meet the needs of females, who are socialized differently and face more limited opportunities (Sullivan, 1996). Growing up in a society that favors men and boys, women are often taught to be passive and accepting of limits; thus, to achieve success, they may need a relationship that encourages them to defy restrictions, become expansive and develop their full potential. In addition to mentors, they need muses. Muses in mythology provided inspiration, encouraging people to recognize and develop their own talents.

In truth, women with disabilities need access to role models, mentors *and* muses. Sometimes one person can serve all three roles, but ideally, women with disabilities would have access to a range

of successful women with disabilities who could provide support and inspiration in a variety of ways.

### **Conclusion**

As long as successful women with disabilities remain invisible in our society, women and girls with disabilities will need direct contact with other women with disabilities who are working in jobs they care about, actively participating in family life, and taking their rightful place in the community. We need these women as role models, mentors and muses. It is only through their presence and wisdom that we can learn how being disabled and female can be an asset, a source of resilience and creativity that must not be denied nor overcome, but rather celebrated.

**Note:** Some of the material in the initial sections of this article comes from Rousso, H. (2001).

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## Lissie's Luv Yums: Fighting Fetal Alcohol Syndrome

by Melissa Clark, with Sr. Johnelle Howanach

My name is Melissa Clark (Lissie), or my Assiniboine given name, Eya Be Washday Weya (Good Words Woman). I am a Gros Ventre Assiniboine Native American from Ft. Belknap Reservation, and now live in Great Falls, Montana, where I am the proud owner of Lissie's Luv Yums, a gourmet dog biscuit business. I am also an associate member of the Sisters of Humility of Davenport, Iowa.

I was born in Havre, Montana in 1976, and am one of the first diagnosed children with Fetal Alcohol Syndrome in the state of Montana. My life mission is to educate people about Fetal Alcohol Syndrome, give hope to them, and show other people with disabilities that they too can develop their own business. Together with my support person who



is also my foster mom, Sister Johnelle Howanach, a Sister of Humility, I share methods and techniques that help me live in my environment and succeed as a person and business owner.

In 1998, when I was finishing Secondary Life Skills, a post-high school class that helps students develop skills to become as independent as possible, my foster mom began looking around the community to see what businesses might work for me. I knew I could not work in the fast food industry, and that I liked

animals, and that I wanted to promote awareness of Fetal Alcohol Syndrome. Only two possibilities seemed worth exploring: a daycare center for children with developmental disabilities, or anything to do with pets, especially dogs. One day she phoned our dear friend Marilyn who advocates for people with alcohol related birth defects. Providentially, Marilyn was thinking of starting a dog walking business at the very same time! So we decided to establish a business partnership. After three months of intense planning we began Wacheeista's Walk a Dog Service. This dog walking business was quite unique in that the monies earned from walking dogs supported our efforts to educate people about Fetal Alcohol Syndrome/Fetal Alcohol Effect. At Christmas we decided to give our canine customers homemade doggie treats specially wrapped and decorated. We made them in our kitchen, and the recipe was made from only the best ingredients. We wanted the treats to look special and taste good to the dogs. We made extra and easily sold them to our dog-loving friends. We received so many orders for more we talked seriously about getting into the gourmet dog biscuit business and selling our dog biscuits, called Lissie's Luv Yums, to people who loved their pets. Thus the seed was planted. Now, where were the resources needed to help our seed dream root and grow?

Through the Montana Rural Institute on Disabilities I was told about monies available from the Montana Jobs Training Partnership Act, which worked to equalize the employment rates of people with disabilities as compared to people without disabilities. We wrote a grant proposal and presented it to New Directions, the vendor for the program. We succeeded in getting the grant and I became the sole proprietor of our newest venture. I now had money to invest in

Lissie's Luv Yums, my gourmet dog treats made from Montana's golden wheat.

In October of that year we hired KFBB-TV to make the best commercial ever. Each year we air the commercial between Thanksgiving and Christmas. Not only is this a gift reminder for



people, but an opportunity to spread our message that pregnant women must not drink. It includes our dog Tiger flipping a Luv Yum off her nose and catching it in her mouth. Now if that wouldn't sell a dog treat, what would?

About the same time we hired our talented neighbor, Donna, to develop signs for the front of our house, where we make and sell Lissie's Luv Yums. When people come to buy their Luv Yums they easily see they're at the right place. The sign shows a perky Dalmatian climbing a small ladder trying to get to a big dog bone on a tree that says Lissie's Luv Yums. With three more dog bones nailed to the tree, the display is a real attention-getter.

Our business is at a very exciting place in development. When it started we only sold our product in Great Falls through local flea markets and friends; it

has now expanded to a company with customers in 15 states, and we receive a lot of orders through our Web site. We even have an Informal Franchise with a woman in Baker, Montana, who makes and sells the biscuits in her area. We have the 12 oz. Montana Made Dog Biscuit, 16 oz. Fun to Fix Dog Biscuit Mix, and Poochie Snack Pack of nine vacuum-sealed biscuits for when people take their dogs on outings. Lissie's Luv Yums uses flour and wheatberries exclusively from WheatMontana Farms in Three Forks, Montana, and no chemicals are added. We say "Even you could eat these!"

Our business is unique in that the money earned supports our efforts to educate people about Fetal Alcohol

Syndrome/Fetal Alcohol Effect. I am a nationally recognized speaker on FAS and on self-employment for people with disabilities, and my foster mom and I have spoken all over the country. One of my favorite presentations was on my reservation where I gave a talk on alcohol and what the after effects of it have been for me. And the reward was not only that the crowd sat and listened, but I got a big honorary naming ceremony afterwards. I couldn't believe it!

On January 25, 2007 I received a Montana Advocacy Award in Helena for my work in helping others with disabilities gain self-employment. And on November 21, 2007, I was officially accepted as an Executive Member in the

2007/2008 *Cambridge Who's Who Executive and Professional Registry*.

My advice to other women with disabilities about running their own businesses is this: Don't let other people discourage you from running your business in the way you want to run it. And I would say as an individual that has a business, let your support person guide you in this. It takes two people to run a business. And it makes it stronger if both of you work together on it.

*Melissa Clark and Sr. Johnelle Howanach live in Great Falls, Montana. For more information about Lissie's Luv Yums visit [www.lissiesluyums.com](http://www.lissiesluyums.com) or call 406/453-2531.*

## Resources: Creative Employment Approaches

### • **Self-Employment: Steps for Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors Helping a Consumer Start a Business.**

*This curriculum was developed as an integral part of a self-employment training program for vocational rehabilitation counselors, counselors working in Section 121 programs, and students pursuing degrees in vocational rehabilitation. It is published by the Rural Institute on Disability at the University of Montana, and can be found online at <http://selfemploymenttraining.ruralinstitute.umt.edu/SEcurriculum.pdf>.*

• **Job Accommodation Network ([www.jan.wvu.edu](http://www.jan.wvu.edu)).** The Web site of the Job Accommodation Network (JAN) offers a variety of practical resources for individuals with disabilities and employers, including a section on entrepreneurship ([www.jan.wvu.edu/entre/](http://www.jan.wvu.edu/entre/)). It includes a Spanish translation page.

• **Women-21.gov.** This Web site from the U.S. Department of Labor and the Small Business Administration assists women entrepreneurs in starting and running their businesses.

### • **Flex-Options for Women ([www.we-inc.org/flex.cfm](http://www.we-inc.org/flex.cfm)).**

*This project and its Web site are sponsored by the Women's Bureau of the U.S. Department of Labor to educate and mentor business owners to develop flexible work arrangements such as flextime, job sharing, telecommuting, and compressed work weeks that benefit a wide range of today's employees. The Web site has extensive information and resources of interest to business owners, employees, and those involved in career planning.*

### • **Eight Effective Steps to Employment Success.**

*In this article written for families of transition-age young people as well as professionals, authors Cary Griffin and Dave Hammis outline eight steps that help young people with disabilities pursue the kind of work they love. Published in Impact: Feature Issue on Parenting Teens and Young Adults with Disabilities from the Institute on Community Integration. Available online at <http://ici.umn.edu/products/impact/192> or by calling 612/624-4512.*

### • **The Red Book: A Summary Guide to Employment Supports for Individuals With Disabilities Under the Social Security Disability Insurance and Supplemental Security Income Programs ([www.ssa.gov/redbook/index.html](http://www.ssa.gov/redbook/index.html)).**

*This guide from the Social Security Administration is especially useful for educators, advocates, rehabilitation professionals, and counselors who serve people with disabilities, as well as families. Included in its extensive information are descriptions of employment supports such as the Ticket to Work Program, Impairment-Related Work Expenses (IRWE), Plan to Achieve Self-Support (PASS), Student Earned Income Exclusion, and Trial Work Period.*

### • **Customized Employment – Practical Solutions for Employment Success ([www.dol.gov/odep/pubs/custom/index.htm](http://www.dol.gov/odep/pubs/custom/index.htm)).**

*This publication is one of many available from the Office of Disability Employment Policy, U.S. Department of Labor, as part of its Customized Employment initiative to build the capacity of workforce systems to serve all customers. The Web site also offers extensive information in other employment areas.*



# Strengthening Employment Outcomes for Rural Women With Disabilities

by Martha Carstensen

Women with disabilities who live in rural communities face complicated challenges in obtaining productive employment that pays a livable wage. A high unemployment rate for women with disabilities in rural communities is associated with a variety of factors that remain constant in each rural geographic region. This article will examine some of the difficulties and opportunities particular to seeking small town/rural paid employment, factors in achieving positive employment outcomes, and options for support networks to enhance work opportunities and successful outcomes for women with disabilities.

*Building organizational partnerships, and assisting women with disabilities to build and participate in interdependent networks, are key to supporting rural women with disabilities to find long-term employment.*

## Barriers to Employment

According to the Association of Programs for Rural Independent Living (APRIL), “decades after the advent of the independent living and disability rights movements, transportation remains the number one issue for people with disabilities living in rural areas.” Transportation funding in rural states is often limited to the population centers of those states. Women with disabilities outside those population centers often

rely on family members to assist them with transportation, without appropriate financial reimbursement or effective coordination. This does not result in the reliable transportation needed to maintain employment, intensifying the disadvantages for women with disabilities in finding competitive employment in their rural communities.

An additional barrier to employment can be found in the under-availability of support services. In reviewing support services in rural states, funding concentrates services to the larger population centers, leaving outreach at a minimum in rural areas, with understaffed satellite offices trying to serve high-need rural communities. With current funding limitations, these satellite offices have staff who service large geographic areas and high caseloads. This reality requires women with disabilities to have advocacy skills and reliable transportation to access these support services in rural communities. Absence of these creates accessibility barriers and community isolation.

Women with disabilities who do access assistance despite the barriers do so with the tenacity that is an icon of rural living by connecting with the strong social network of small town living. Interdependence is the foundation of this social network in rural communities. Women with disabilities who are part of this interconnectedness of community get their needs met, while those who are not interconnected live in isolation.

## Building Partnerships

Schools, community service providers, employers, and families can enhance work opportunities and successful outcomes for women with disabilities by identifying the barriers and then focusing on solutions in partnership. This

partnership connects all support systems within the social network of rural America, braiding and blending personnel and services by using public and private dollars to enhance access to employment opportunities for rural women with disabilities.

Community services such as Independent Living Centers are an ideal choice to take a lead role in the development of this partnership since they are often the hub for people with disabilities in rural communities. Schools are another; mandated through the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) to provide transition services to youth with disabilities, their services can be strengthened by partnerships with CILs, businesses, and self-advocacy and other organizations as part of their transition services. Together these partners can create multiple points of entry into the employment support system, and help women develop the skills (including self-advocacy, self-determination, and social networking skills) to access them. For instance, entrepreneurial opportunities abound in rural communities and by establishing a mentor network to help women learn a marketable trade, agencies, businesses, schools and community organizations working together can help women with disabilities make a livable wage by building their own ventures with guidance and persistence. Partnerships can also address the rural transportation barriers through innovative approaches such as mobility management (also called coordinated mobility). This is a model for expanding transportation options that combines the resources of human service, employment, non-profit, business, transit, and other entities in a locale to collaboratively coordinate and deliver transportation services (McLary, 2005; Grande, 2005). And partnerships between schools and service providers can

provide training that grows the use of technology such as the Internet by women with disabilities, changing the course of how rural women access work and compete in the global market.

### Personal Networking

In rural America networking is a daily activity. Social networks become employment networks, and learning how to capitalize on this connection is essential to building self-determination and employment opportunities for women with disabilities. One example of how social networking can assist women in gaining meaningful employment is the ability to obtain customized employment through job carving or shaping that creates a flexible schedule to meet the needs of the employer/employee relationship.

This concept is more acceptable to an employer when they and the employee have an established relationship. Since social networking is an essential component of job acquisition, rural communities provide an advantage by nature for women with disabilities through offering natural opportunities to interact with the same people on a recurring basis and build relationships.

### Conclusion

Building organizational partnerships, and assisting women with disabilities to build and participate in interdependent networks, are key to supporting rural women with disabilities to find long-term employment and shift from poverty to self-reliance. Living and working in a rural setting with strengthened

community support now is a viable option that can afford economic well-being for women with disabilities.

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## Resources: Employment, Women, Diversity and Disabilities

### • **A Life of Choices: Lois & Elaine's Story.**

*This video takes the audience from the back wards of institutions for people with developmental disabilities to the halls of the U.S. Supreme Court. Two women with disabilities wanted to live in the community. An attorney fought for their rights. They won inclusion for all people with disabilities. But, that's really when this story starts. Learn how they found the best places to live, and followed their natural talents to become entrepreneurs. (VHS; 17 min. Available in Closed Captioned in English, Open Captioned in English and Spanish, and Audio Descriptor in English) from the Institute on Human Development and Disability, University of Georgia, 706/542-3457 or visit [www.ihdd.uga.edu/Resources/Resources-Videos-CDs.html](http://www.ihdd.uga.edu/Resources/Resources-Videos-CDs.html).*

• **The Rural Institute on Disability (<http://ruralinstitute.umt.edu>).** On the Web site of this center at the University of Montana, Missoula, are a range of resources related to rural employment and people with disabilities, including Native American business

development resources, self-employment resources, information on SSI and self-employment, and strategies for involving people with disabilities in rural economic development.

• **From Marginalized to Maximized Opportunities for Diverse Youth with Disabilities.** By A. Trainor, L. Lindstrom, M. Simon-Burroughs, J. Martin, & A. McCray Sorrells. Published in *Career Development for Exceptional Individuals*, 31(56), 2008. In this position paper the authors argue for educators, researchers, and policymakers to attend to social, political, economic, educational, and cultural contexts in developing effective interventions and improving post-school outcomes for diverse youths with disabilities. Available online at <http://cde.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/31/1/56>.

• **National Technical Assistance Center on Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders with Disabilities ([www.ntac.hawaii.edu](http://www.ntac.hawaii.edu)).** The goal of this national center is to increase employment opportunities for Asian

Americans and Pacific Islanders with disabilities. Toward that end its Web site includes extensive resources especially of use to educators, vocational rehabilitation services providers, transition services personnel, and employers. Among the resources are an online curriculum titled Introduction to Disability/Rehabilitation with Asian/Pacific Islander Americans, and a DVD titled Abilities at Work, which tells the compelling stories of four Asian and Pacific Islander women and men with disabilities who are successfully employed.

• **DisabilityInfo.gov.** This Web site from the federal government provides an expansive range of national and state disability-related resources and information, including advice for individuals with disabilities seeking work; help for employers looking for hard-working and dedicated employees; information on employment rights, laws and regulations; resources for employment programs; and job accommodations for people with disabilities.

## Thinking Outside the Box: Competitive Employment for Women With Severe Disabilities

by Wendy Parent

Women with disabilities are reported to have the highest unemployment rates when compared to women without disabilities or men with or without disabilities (Doren & Benz, 2001). Unfortunately, women with disabilities who are working also tend to experience poorer employment outcomes. They tend to be over-represented in lower-wage occupations and under-represented in higher skill jobs, managerial and professional positions, and non-traditional occupations (O'Day & Foley, 2008; Rousso & Wehmeyer, 2001). For those women who have a severe disability the outcomes are

*The creative, nontraditional employment situations developed using these approaches illustrate some of the possibilities that can be achieved.*

even more staggering, with fewer than one-quarter actually participating in the labor force (Jans & Stoddard, 1999; Smith, 2007).

It is encouraging to note that today women are working in larger numbers than ever before and those figures are projected to increase substantially by 2014 (U.S. Department of Labor Women's Bureau, 2008). Of particular significance is the representation of women with severe disabilities who are participating in the competitive labor market as a result of the *supported* and *customized employment* services they are receiving (Parent, 2004). The creative, nontraditional employment situations

developed using these approaches illustrate some of the possibilities that can be achieved.

### **Supported and Customized Employment Opportunities**

*Supported employment* is characterized by competitive employment in community businesses with individualized assistance by a skilled job coach who helps a person find a job and learn how to do the job, and provides follow-along support to keep their job (Wehman, Inge, Revell, & Brooke, 2007). Examples of types of job supports include natural supports, assistive technology, job modifications, job carving, rehabilitation engineering, compensatory strategies, and behavioral training techniques. *Customized placement* strategies involve negotiating a relationship between an individual and employer that meets the needs of both and results in individually designed services, supports, and jobs (Callahan & Rogan, 2004; Button, 2007). The following are descriptions of some types of supported and customized employment, and examples of how they're expanding options for women with severe disabilities:

- **Created Jobs.** Establish a new job or job duties that did not previously exist as a position within a business. For example, Sally's position was created in the medical records department of a hospital to address the backlog of patient records by having her organize medical documents in sequential order for filing in patients' folders by medical records staff.
- **Carved Jobs.** Redistribute job duties from one position to another, tailoring them to the job seeker's unique skills and abilities. For example, Mary's job coach carved a job at a veterinarian's office where she works as an assistant with responsibility for

feeding and walking the animals, freeing up coworkers to take care of customers and medical needs.

- **Resource Ownership.** Purchase equipment, machinery, or other items that an individual owns and brings to the workplace as part of their employment, offering an additional resource to the employer. For example, Cindy purchased a computer and educational software with help from her rehabilitation counselor and was hired as a day care assistant, a job where she used the equipment to instruct and entertain the young children.
- **Business Within a Business.** Develop a self-employment venture within an existing business setting. For example, Cathie brought magazine racks, magazines, and books to a coffee shop where she sells them to coffee shop patrons. She receives assistance from coworkers and the owner, who ring up her sales for a small administration fee.
- **Self-Employment.** Become a small business owner and operator. For example, Judy has become an entrepreneur by making and selling her artwork, t-shirts, stationary, and miscellaneous items to local businesses, art fairs, conferences, and through the Internet. She does this with support from school, adult services, and family.

One of the major factors that women with severe disabilities frequently identify as contributing to these positive employment outcomes is the presence of an influential person or role model in their lives such as a mother, teacher, friend, advocate, or service provider (Parent, 2007; Rousso, 2008). For those of us who might find ourselves in that role, it is important to identify the things that we can do that have been



found to make a difference. Following are some suggestions:

- Explore our own attitudes to insure we do not have gender-biased beliefs that influence our actions and the messages we send.
- Have high expectations that encourage women with severe disabilities to set high goals and strive to accomplish them.
- Avoid gender stereotyping of what women and men can and cannot do that may limit possibilities.
- Promote techniques that enhance self-esteem and self-determination to better prepare women with disabilities to speak up for themselves.
- Become aware of creative employment strategies as described above and introduce these options to women with severe disabilities and those who support them.
- Provide opportunities for women with disabilities to gain experience and skills that enhance their employment outcomes. Encourage postsecondary education and/or training through technical colleges or apprenticeships.
- Facilitate linkages with other female role models, mentors, and peers who have similar experiences.
- Arrange essential disability and generic employment services, supports, and accommodations.

## Conclusion

As stated by Secretary of Labor Elaine Chao, "Women have come a long way in our society, and the future holds even greater promise" (Chao, 2008). The Department of Labor's Women's Bureau has established the increasing of women's employment opportunities as the number one goal of their 2007-2015 strategic plan (U.S. Department of Labor Women's Bureau, 2007). It is imperative that women with severe disabilities are included in these efforts. Supported and customized employment strategies can contribute significantly to these desired outcomes, enabling more women with

severe disabilities to become employed and experience the economic, personal, and social benefits that competitive work provides.

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## Trying Out College Life

*In summer 2008, 17 girls with intellectual disabilities from across Kansas got a taste of college life, and postsecondary employment possibilities, at the three-day Camp KU, held at Kansas University in Lawrence. Hosted by the Kansas University Center on Developmental Disabilities, the camp helped them think about their own futures by hearing from women with disabilities who are in a variety of professions, experiencing campus life, and exploring community sites such as the Science City Museum (in photo above). When asked*

*what they learned at Camp KU, the girls said the following:*

- "We learned how to use all our strength and skills."
- "I learned that I can do anything I set my mind to and how to set goals."
- "I've learned that a lot of jobs are open."
- "If you work hard enough you can start and run your own business."
- "Follow your dreams no matter whatever it may be."
- "I learned that you can do anything even with disability."
- "I learned to never give up or anything."

*The girls at the camp were part of the Girls at Work project, an online, self-directed, education-to-employment curriculum project in Kansas funded by the U.S. Department of Education's Women's Educational Equity Act program.*

Contributed by Wendy Parent, Kansas University Center on Developmental Disabilities. For more information about Camp KU or Girls at Work call 785/864-1062.

# Employment Disparities for Minority Women With Disabilities

by Diane L. Smith and Reginald J. Alston

The 2000 U.S. Census estimates that 16.8 million civilian, non-institutionalized Americans from ethnic and racial minorities have long-lasting disabling conditions or impairments (Waldrop, 2003). When looking at the relationship between disability and employment, researchers have found that minorities with disabilities are often at increased risk for unemployment (Smith Randolph & Andresen, 2004). In order to understand and address the unique issues of minority women with disabilities in relation to employment, one must consider how the issues of gender, race/ethnicity, and disability intersect.

## Framework of Triple Jeopardy

Separately and collectively, women, persons with disabilities, and persons of color have been viewed as minorities. In *representation theories*, the term “minority status” refers to groups that share a history of being denied access to resources and privileges, such as economic opportunity, communicative self-representation, and preferred lifestyle (Foucault, 1986; Wirth, 1945; Habermas, 1987). Wirth expanded this concept by defining minorities as “a group of people, who, because of physical or cultural characteristics, are singled out from others in society...for differential and unequal treatment, and who therefore regard themselves as objects of collective discrimination” (p. 347).

In his theory of *simultaneous oppression*, Stuart (1992) identifies three areas in which African American people with disabilities’ experiences can be seen as a distinct form of oppression. These are (1) limited or no individuality and disability identity; (2) resource discrimination, for example, inequitable access to financial opportunities; and (3) isolation within the African American community and family. Vernon (1999) argues that

the concept of simultaneous oppression is too simplistic an analysis to capture the day-to-day experience of those who possess negatively labeled multiple identities because it overlooks the importance of social class positioning. The author argues that the reality of being a multiple “other” results in shared alliances, as well as oppositional interests between different groups of others (Vernon, 1996c). Thus, African American people with disabilities, women, gay men and lesbians, older people, and those from the working class all experience oppression singularly, multiply and simultaneously depending on the context (Vernon, 1996a, 1996b).

The employment experiences of minority women with disabilities fall within all of these frameworks. This population experiences the limited access to resources and privileges described in the minority status model; simultaneous oppression when they experience discrimination based on gender, race/ethnicity, and disability; and the multiple “other” framework when they are not completely included in any of these groups. These issues, singularly or collectively, affect their ability to attain and maintain meaningful employment.

A number of factors need to be addressed to improve employment outcomes for minority women with disabilities. The remainder of this article will touch on three: educational preparation, participation in vocational rehabilitation programs, and work-role stereotypes. Although the effect of minority status appears to be prevalent among all non-Caucasian women, the majority of research has been conducted on women with disabilities who are African American. Therefore, results and assumptions in this article must be approached with caution when addressing those who are not African American.

## Educational Preparation

A National Council on Disability (2004) report to the President and Congress found that although legislation such as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and No Child Left Behind had improved the condition of students with disabilities, they generally continue to be at risk, and minority students with disabilities are particularly at risk, for inadequate preparation for employment. The problems they face are discussed in a report by the Office of Special Education Programs, U.S. Department of Education, and include inability to speak clearly and poor assertion skills. In addition, youth of color are less likely to have had their disabilities recognized and addressed earlier, and their parents are less likely to have been the first to identify their disabilities and request services.

## Vocational Rehabilitation Participation

Another issue to be addressed is participation in vocational rehabilitation programs. Minorities with disabling conditions and impairments make up a significant and important group of people who can benefit from focused rehabilitation efforts. Brown (1997) found that Caucasians receiving vocational rehabilitation services were employed successfully more often than African Americans, received more vocational rehabilitation services than African Americans, and were more likely to be employed in professional, technical, and management positions. Additional studies have confirmed these conclusions, finding that Caucasians are more likely than African Americans to be accepted for vocational rehabilitation services (Capella, 2002; Wilson, 2002), achieve closure (Moore, Feist-Price, & Alston, 2002), and experience higher rates of competitive employment (Olney and Kennedy, 2002).

Rehabilitation services designed to assist individuals with disabilities appear

to be less accessible to women and minority groups, although they comprise a larger percentage of persons with disabilities (Capella, 2002; Moore, Feist-Price, & Alston, 2002; Olney & Kennedy, 2002; Wilson, 2002). Minority women with disabilities would be most likely to suffer from exclusionary practices. Minority women may also be unaware of services they are eligible to receive, in part due to advertising confined within the agency or support agencies.

### Work-Role Conflict

Similar to minority women who are not disabled, minority women with disabilities often encounter work-role stereotypes such as the belief that women should seek employment in traditionally female (and often lower paying) occupations (e.g., nurse, secretary, child care worker) (Bielby, 2000; Hollingsworth & Mastroberti, 1983). In addition, African American women may experience greater difficulty with multiple role conflict as a result of group-specific factors such as a higher number of offspring, greater likelihood of single parent status, and greater work environment stress (Branch, 2007; Staples, 1985; Sue & Sue, 1990; Richie, 1992). The impact of this conflict may compromise the employment of minority women with disabilities through decreased work opportunities due to lack of flexibility on the part of the employee. For example, some careers may demand more time than a single parent is able to provide as an employee. Less demanding (and potentially less profitable) careers may provide more flexibility for a working single parent. Thus, it can be argued that these factors heighten role conflict for African American women with disabilities (Alston & McCowan, 1994).

### Ideas for Improvement

There is a need for more study of the unique experiences of minority girls and women with disabilities in relation to education and employment, and better

identification of factors that support their success in the workforce. Meanwhile, the following are some practical strategies to immediately address some of the issues identified in this article:

- Rehabilitation professionals can expand their traditional definition of support networks in helping African American women with disabilities utilize, reclaim, or develop new support systems. For example, development of role model and mentor programs can be especially useful for minority women with disabilities (Rubin & Roessler, 1983). Successfully employed minority women with disabilities could be recruited to serve as mentors and provide job search guidance, workplace survival tips, and strategies for managing multiple roles (Alston & McCowan, 1994). Additional networking and mentoring could be provided through chatrooms and other social networking sites on the Internet.
- Rehabilitation agencies could increase the number of minority women with disabilities participating in VR services by developing outreach programs designed to access this population. For example, the African American church serves as a place of spiritual and emotional support as well as a source for gaining and sharing information. By having their professional staff members address church groups, the rehabilitation agencies could increase public awareness of programs, provide a forum in which African American women with disabilities could express their concerns and needs, and demonstrate that the agency has a commitment to serving African Americans with disabilities.
- Agencies and organizations can establish a national network of employers and minority persons with disabilities to enable the sharing of job leads, to reduce feelings of isolation, and to provide a forum for proactively discussing employment issues (Wright and Leung, 1993).

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## Transition Years: An Examination of Outcomes for Girls

by Fabricio E. Balcazar

*“Transition is not a discrete time in life affecting only the individual and one aspect of his or her functioning. Rather, transition is part of a lifelong process that begins at birth, relates to all life roles and affects the individual, family and community.”*  
(Szymanski, 1994)

The long-term outcome of effective transition planning for youth with disabilities should be career development leading to competitive and meaningful employment and valued adult roles. In order to achieve this result, it is crucial to provide quality supports to young adults with disabilities who need them as they move

- An estimated 30.4% (+/- 0.8 percentage points) of non-institutionalized Black or African American, non-Hispanic, women with a disability, aged 21 to 64 years, with all education levels, were employed. The rate of employment for Black men was 29.8%.
- The level of employment for Hispanic women with a disability was an estimated 31.7%, while for Hispanic men with a disability it was 45.1%.
- Employment for White women with a disability was at an estimated 35.9%, while for White men it was 43.8%.
- Employment for Native American women with a disability was an estimated 31.1%, while for men it was 35.3%.
- An estimated 36.5% of Asian women with a disability were employed, while the employment rate for Asian men was 46.9%.

So with the exception of Black men, all women with disabilities had lower employment rates than men with disabilities, and White and Asian women had employment rates higher than African American, Hispanic and Native American women with disabilities.

Wagner, Newman, Cameto, Garza and Levine, (2005) found that the employment gap between females and males with disabilities is diminishing (previous studies reported a gap as high as 40% in full-time employment and earning differences of as much as 78%). However, Wagner et al. also indicate that although females with disabilities are enrolling in college more often than males – particularly in two-year college programs – girls continue to have a larger high school dropout rate than boys. Alarming, the average dropout rate for Hispanics overall is much larger than for any other group (27.8% compared with 6.9% for Whites non-Hispanics and 13.1% for non-

Hispanic Blacks). Unfortunately, young people who leave school without a high school diploma are unlikely to be able to secure employment in this increasingly technological workforce. Therefore, those who fail to complete a minimum of a high school education are likely to live in poverty. This is true for youth in general, and especially true for teenage mothers, and youth with disabilities (U.S. General Accountability Office [GAO], 2002).

National data also indicate that students with disabilities are less likely than students without disabilities to enroll in postsecondary education. Of those that do, most enter community colleges or trade schools (Wagner et al., 2005). Additionally, of the 6% of undergraduate college students reporting a disability, Hispanic and African American individuals made up less than 10% of the total. Of all students enrolled in college programs, there is a much higher graduation rate for individuals without disabilities than for those with disabilities. In addition, federal policies for cash benefits, health insurance, housing, and employment programs provide disincentives for low-income families of young women and men with disabilities to support their attempts to become gainfully employed and independent. Researchers have noted that some families become concerned about the loss of the income derived from Supplemental Security Income (SSI) and other public assistance (Chan et al., 2008). Therefore, there is a need to make young adults and their families aware of the limitations of welfare dependency and the missed opportunities for social mobility and positive long-term outcomes.

Taken together, these findings suggest there are many challenges that youth with disabilities – and especially teenage girls from minority groups – face in their transition out of high school and into adult life. Hogansen, Gil-Hashiwabara, Greenen, Powers and Powers (2006)

*Taken together, these findings suggest there are many challenges that youth with disabilities – and especially teenage girls from minority groups – face in their transition into adult life.*

from high school to adult life. Career development is necessary to ensure that the jobs attained by these individuals are long-lasting and provide a mechanism for increased self-sufficiency. The road to career development beyond job placement is paved by individuals pursuing postsecondary education options upon graduation from high school.

This is a challenge for low-income minority students with disabilities, and girls in particular. In fact, according to a study by Houtenville, Erickson, and Lee (2007), in the year 2005 the following was true in the United States:

identified several important problems with the transition plans of students in special education, particularly regarding the absence of postsecondary education and career development goals, limited emphasis on vocational training, and lack of plans for reaching the goals. The authors made eight recommendations for the successful transition planning for girls that school personnel could follow:

- Engage in effective transition practices, like promoting youth involvement in the transition planning process, participation in extracurricular activities, career planning, and development of skills such as self-determination and advocacy, and by offering mentoring.
- Develop transition plans that matter to the student and her family.
- Educate and support professionals like vocational rehabilitation counselors – particularly if they do not seem to be familiar with best practices for transition planning (e.g., family involvement, interagency collaboration, and development of academic and life skills) (Kohler, 1996).

- Respect and listen to the girls' goals and aspirations.
- Recruit and provide mentors and role models (especially successful women with similar disabilities).
- Promote high expectations for the girls.
- Promote self-determination.
- Attend to the cultural context, including the gender expectations and roles of each student's culture.

Building greater awareness among educational professionals who serve young adults with disabilities may also help to counter the distrust and lack of knowledge about accommodations that persists in many settings. Family members need to be included in the process and contribute in the support of the career and employment aspirations of their daughter with a disability. In addition, by developing services that increase student empowerment at all levels within high school and in the vocational rehabilitation system, youth will be better able to exert control over their environment and have an effect in the attainment of their postsecondary goals (McDonald, Keys, & Balcazar, 2007).

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## School Dropout and Teen Moms With Learning Disabilities

Decades of research have shown that teenage mothers and teens with disabilities are both at high risk for dropping out of school and experiencing a host of negative consequences, including poverty. Although parenting rates vary by disability type, the National Longitudinal Transition Study (2001) found that 41% of young women with disabilities become mothers by their early 20s, compared with 28% of young women in the general population. This places teen girls with disabilities at especially high risk for leaving school because of pregnancy.

To begin to understand why many teenage mothers with disabilities drop out of school, the Young Moms Study at the University of Illinois at Chicago explored the factors related to high school dropout among a sample of

African American and Latina teenage mothers with learning disabilities (LD) in a large urban area. The study included interviews with 10 teenage mothers with LD who had dropped out of school and 10 who had not dropped out and were on track to complete their secondary education. It also included focus groups with 24 educational and social service professionals.

What led some teenage mothers with LD to persist in school while others dropped out? Teenage mothers with LD and providers reported that, in contrast to those who dropped out of school, teenage mothers with LD who persisted experienced the following:

- Support at home, including assistance with child care (e.g., family, boyfriend or other friends provided child care or helped

find professional care), and encouragement related to school.

- Support at school, including teacher support (e.g., caring relationships and needed academic support to accommodate their LD); positive relationships with peers (e.g., supportive friendship with no or limited threats of violence and ridicule); and accommodating enrollment and attendance policies (e.g., flexible limits on absences, ability to attend their own or their child's appointments and make up work).

The support that the teenage mothers with LD who persisted experienced at home and at school encouraged and bolstered their motivation for school. This helped them to stay focused in spite of the many competing challenges that motherhood presented.

[Taylor-Ritzler, continued on page 34]

## Preparing Our Daughter for Successful Work: The Experience of a Mom Who's Been There

by Sheryl Evelo

Our daughter, Stephanie, was born with Down syndrome, and additional significant health problems, in 1969. At that time people with disabilities were being moved from large state institutions to smaller community group homes, or were remaining within the family. In one of life's ironies, both mom and dad earned teaching degrees in special education at the same time. Given this, it was natural for us to jump right in, not only as first-time parents, but also as advocates, to make sure our daughter had the same opportunities and experiences

young adult, the Americans with Disabilities Act and transition legislation were enacted. Transition laws required support for students as they planned for and moved from high school to postsecondary education, employment, and adult living. These legislative milestones opened the doors for Stephanie. She was fully included and supported in the schools as well as in the community as she matured.

Although we were surrounded by special education during the day (we both taught in the public schools), our family and home life involved lots of travel and social get-togethers, and we expected Stephanie would be a part of it. We believed she would get to know the world just as the world would get to know her. Remember, it wasn't so common then to see kids with disabilities at the neighborhood pool or taking dance lessons at the YMCA. We intentionally did not seek out "special" lessons or play groups. We expected that even though it might be tough sometimes, Stephanie would need to learn how to navigate the world. As a result, she became comfortable and accepted in the same places as other young people.

In high school, Stephanie had a picture-perfect transition to her adult life. Although transition IEPs were still in their infancy and transition planning was still a steep learning curve, we used our dual roles as special education teachers and parents to become partners with the school staff. Minneapolis schools already had in place an extensive community-based vocational training program. Stephanie participated in numerous job try-outs to develop job skills and to learn about her strengths and interests. Job coaches supported her on those sites. They evaluated her interests and preferences and helped her develop work and social skills related to employment. A transition course at the local

technical college bridged the gap between high school and postsecondary education. Office and clerical classes also provided Stephanie with accommodations. Stephanie participated in an independent apartment living training program and she joined several social groups to continue her active social life. The social groups and peer friendships were very important to her, and she learned to move easily between her worlds of people with and without disabilities.

By the time Stephanie finished high school in 1990, we had on board all of the adult service agencies that would be supporting her: the county social worker, a vocational rehabilitation counselor, and an employment services agency for job support. Her physicians' recommendations were also an integral part of the planning. The team determined that Stephanie was well-suited to office and clerical jobs. Her final transition meeting was held at the Arthritis Foundation where she was offered her first job; the foundation staff were so impressed with her work while she was still in high school that they hired her immediately after graduation. Picturing this large team of people – school staff, work staff, adult service agencies – with Stephanie sitting in the middle of this huge conference table being offered a job, still brings a smile. What a thrill it was for all of us. We had succeeded.

As I look back over the past 39 years, the saying "It takes a village to raise a child" has been in place as we raised Stephanie and prepared her for success in the workplace. Even with significant health issues and physical limits, she has been successfully employed since graduating from high school, working with modifications as a clerical assistant or office support staff in both non-profit organizations and competitive businesses. She continues to be paid

*We continue to be so proud of Stephanie. We love her giggle and her wonderful sense of humor. She has a strength and resolve to live fully, and she doesn't miss a thing.*

other kids had. We were determined that she would grow-up and play with the neighborhood kids, attend our neighborhood school, and begin her adult life working competitively. This focus had an impact on our expectations, on her employment, and on her independence.

### **Raising Stephanie as Part of a Village**

Stephanie was born on the cusp of new federal legislation. The Education of All Handicapped Children Act (now called the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act) required schools to integrate students with disabilities into mainstream education. By the time she was a





competitive wages. There have been bumps along the way of course – jobs lost due to cut-backs or restructuring, or Stephanie decided to move on. She held some temporary volunteer jobs while looking for paid employment, and those experiences helped to broaden her skills.

### **On the Job Today**

Currently, Stephanie works 20 hours a week divided between two part-time positions. Monday, Wednesday and Friday she works at the University of Minnesota, at the National Center on Educational Outcomes, as office support staff; Tuesday and Thursday she works at a law firm as office support staff. When asked what she likes about her jobs, she says “I like my co-workers a lot; they are friendly. And I like to do a variety of things such as working on the computer, putting together training packets and helping with other projects. And I do like the money part.” Doing a good job at work is important to her, and she says that she’s successful because she has a lot of practice working in offices and can get support when she needs it.

Some factors that have guaranteed successful employment for Stephanie are these:

- She receives support from supervisors who communicate expectations and provide feedback.
- The jobs are well designed, they fill the employers’ needs and are matched with her skills and physical limits.
- Co-workers are friendly and fun, and include her in work and social events.
- Job tasks are varied.
- Employers are willing to do what it takes to ensure success.

Intrinsic qualities Stephanie has that also contribute to her success are these:

- She’s a good self-advocate and great problem solver.
- She’s wonderfully funny, loves social interactions and has great social skills.
- She’s motivated by having her own money, wants to pay her own way, and pays her rent and other bills.
- She’s willing to learn new tasks and to take risks.

- She has strong self-determination.
- She has a strong work ethic and wants to do a good job.

### **Lessons from Our Experience**

Some strategies for raising Stephanie that may have contributed to her success in the workplace, and that may be useful to other families, are the following:

- We had high expectations for her, including that she would learn to read, write, and have functional math skills as well as appropriate social skills.
- We expected teachers would be our partners.
- We understood that the world isn’t always accepting of differences and it might be hard for Stephanie sometimes. We tried to prepare her for disappointments.
- We worked cooperatively developing plans with adult agencies.
- We understood that the best of plans are just that, a plan on paper. Financial cut-backs, changes in resources, and restructuring can interrupt or change a service. Direct care staff come and go frequently, so we remained involved in recruiting, training, and retaining good people.
- Because of disability legislation, we were able to effectively advocate for the services and supports she needed.
- We continue to try to balance and respect Stephanie’s need to be independent with our need to ensure her safety and health. This includes regularly consulting with her physicians and relying on their support.

We continue to be so proud of Stephanie. We love her giggle and her wonderful sense of humor. She has a strength and resolve to live fully, and she doesn’t miss a thing.

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## Why is Transition Planning Different for Girls?: Five Key Reasons

by Jennifer Hogansen, Eleanor Gil-Kashiwabara, Sarah Geenen, Laurie Powers and Kristin Powers

*This article is excerpted and reprinted with permission from "Supporting Girls with Disabilities as They Transition to Adulthood" published by the Gender and Transition Project, Regional Research Institute for Human Services, Portland State University, Portland Oregon.*

The Gender and Transition Project conducted a needs assessment to identify key factors that contribute to problems in transition planning for young women in special education. We first utilized discussion groups with female youth, their parents, and the professionals who work with them, such as teachers and school psychologists. Then, the data from these discussions guided and informed development of a survey for identified female and male youth currently in special education. This survey was administered to youth in special education and parents of youth in special education at two large, urban school districts on the West Coast. Based on our discussions and surveys, we identified the following factors.

### **Reason One: Lack of Role Models and Mentors**

- Youth need people in their lives who encourage and support their transition goals. Mentors and role models are important for exposing girls to different opportunities, and making their particular goals seem possible.
- The youth in our studies lacked exposure to appropriate role models and mentors. For instance, female youth lacked female role models and mentors who experienced a similar disability or condition. This finding is especially strong for culturally diverse youth who experience this "triple jeopardy."
- If youth have role models and mentors, they are likely to be informal relationships, rather than formal.

Indeed, many parents and professionals talked about the negative influence of media, which often provides "unrealistic" role models for girls in particular.

- Youth lack exposure to role models and mentors who are working in their areas of career interest.
- Male youth may have more opportunities to find role models and mentors than their female peers (for example, coaches). Further, parents reported that males seem to feel more comfortable asking for support from adults in their lives. One father said: "I got mentors throughout my life. You know, 10 years with this older guy and 15 years with this guy that taught me this and that. And my son did the same things, baseball coaches, football coaches, people he's worked for. And for the life of me, I cannot see my daughter doing that, nor can I see many of the girls doing that. I don't see them getting these mentors that teach them these skills..."

### **Reason Two: Different Goals for Transitions**

- Youth have a variety of goals for their futures. The adults in their lives also have goals for these youth. Unfortunately, these goals often differ dramatically. A majority of youth (58% of the survey sample) felt their family had different ideas about their future than themselves, and 48% of the parents acknowledged they had different ideas about their child's future.
- The above finding was even stronger when youth and parents were asked about the goals that teachers have for youth. For instance, nearly 70% of youth acknowledged that teachers have had different ideas about their future than themselves.

- There can be important differences between the goals of culturally diverse families and the mainstream goals that schools deem appropriate for youth. Culturally diverse families and youth may face stereotypes and discrimination as a result. Indeed, some of the discussion groups showed insensitivity on the part of some professionals; for example, some professionals criticized family-oriented goals that many culturally diverse parents have for their children. One commented, "I really had her on track to go to college and she got pregnant because that's what they do. You know, that's what all the little Hispanic girls do in her little group. And you know, you lose them then because then they do drop out of school to have their baby or they disappear."
- Female youth were significantly more likely than males to report that they keep silent about what they want because other people (parents, teachers) expect them to go along with ideas.
- Female youth have goals that are often oriented towards relationships. While nearly 40% of girls surveyed indicated that having children was important for their future, only 21% of boys said the same.

### **Reason Three: Lack of Match Between Aspirations and Training**

- The differences in perspectives of goals between youth, parents, and the professionals who work with them often contribute to a lack of match between a youth's vocational goals and the actual job training they receive. For instance, 30% of the surveyed youth indicated that other people want them to be interested in jobs/careers that differ from what they want.

- As a result, 46% of the youth reported that they received little to no training in work skills that will lead to a successful career. For example, one girl related her vocational training experience in the animal care field in this way: “All I did was get stuck at PetSmart stocking shelves. I thought I was going to be like bathing and feeding animals and having fun.”
- Parents and professionals agreed that vocational training is an important component of the transition to independent living for youth. They noted that youth need opportunities such as job shadowing, informational interviews, and networking.
- Unfortunately, 60% of surveyed parents reported that their child was not able to find people who can help them get a job.
- Female youth reported limited exposure to non-gender-stereotypic vocational experiences. These youth were able to find training in childcare positions, such as daycare and elementary schools, but the girls with goals other than childcare encountered more difficulty and barriers when they tried to gain vocational experience.
- Some youth felt they missed out on certain vocational opportunities because they were in special education.
- Because of the gender roles and expectations in certain cultures, culturally diverse boys and girls may have quite different experiences in their work/vocational training activities from each other and their non-culturally diverse peers. This lack of understanding and appreciation for the cultural context has negative implications for the way teachers work with their students.

#### **Reason Four: Low Expectations, High Fears**

- Transition planning is an important bridge for ensuring young people with disabilities move into productive and successful adult lives. For many, a successful transition involves some level of independence and self-sufficiency.
- Female youth with disabilities, when compared to males, are often considered more vulnerable, not only because of a disability but also because of their gender. For instance, over 58% of females surveyed reported that their family doesn’t want them to do certain things because of concerns for their safety, compared to 49% of male youth with disabilities.
- Female youth were significantly more likely than males to report that people expect less of them because of their disability, and expect less of them because of their gender.
- Parents and professionals worried that the transition goals of their daughters were influenced by their relationships with males. Culturally diverse youth, especially, were described by adults as being vulnerable to sexuality issues, such as teen pregnancy.
- Female youth talked about the difficulty their parents seemed to have in “letting go” and allowing them to become more independent. Safety is a major concern for many parents. Girls may get mixed messages from their families as a result, such as this voiced by one parent: “My desires...for my daughter (are) to be stress free and happy, also to know that there are sexual predators that can harm her...”
- In particular, some female youth felt that their teachers treated them like children, believing them incapable of making decisions for themselves.

#### **Reason Five: Low Self-Perception**

- Female youth reported that they often feel “different” from their peers because of their disability, and they often experience low self-esteem. Many felt shame and embarrassment. One said: “I had an experience this semester, actually, with a geography teacher. I was asking him about a note taker and finding a solution to some-

how keep on the same page with his lecture. He, in front of the entire class, said, ‘Oh, note takers. Those are for handicapped people right?’ And it was really embarrassing.”

- Experiences in special education can play a large part in the self-perception of youth, and for many, having a disability and being in special education is connected to teasing and a negative self-image.
- These negative feelings are often compounded by racial discrimination for culturally diverse youth. For example, some parents reported that their daughters experienced additional rejection from their peers because of their skin color and disability.
- Some girls valued being attractive to males and having a child who loved them. This finding may help describe the finding that female youth with disabilities are more likely than males with disabilities to have parenting responsibilities after exiting high school (Doren & Benz, 2001).
- Parents and teachers described girls with disabilities as “pleasers.”
- The female youth in our discussion groups often talked about their negative experiences in the transition planning process. Many stated that they don’t even like to participate in transition planning meetings because it seems “pointless and embarrassing.”
- Some youth felt that teachers limited their opportunities not only because of their disability, but also because of their culturally diverse background. These youth noted that they were “looked down on” and “teachers didn’t help enough” as a result.

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*The complete report, including recommendations for successful transition planning for girls, may be found at [www.mcoe.org/NR/rdonlyres/C65F2A46-6160-4B57-8B74-2BEE33ECA303/0/GirlswithDisabil.pdf](http://www.mcoe.org/NR/rdonlyres/C65F2A46-6160-4B57-8B74-2BEE33ECA303/0/GirlswithDisabil.pdf).*



# Postsecondary Education for Women With Disabilities: What Families Should Know

by Christine D. Bremer

Today, postsecondary education is an important part of improving employment outcomes for women with disabilities. Employment rates of women with disabilities rise from 32% for high school graduates, to nearly 42% for those with some college or an Associates degree, to over 52% for those women with disabilities who have a Bachelor's degree or higher (O'Day & Foley, 2008). For family members, educators, and others who have a role in guiding and encouraging young women who may wish to pursue postsecondary education, the information in the remainder of this article can provide some helpful background for the process of exploring postsecondary learning.

## The Power of Expectations

While parents of teens often wonder about how much influence their opinions really have on their children, research has found that parents' expectations are strongly related to student participation in postsecondary education (Wagner, Newman, Cameto, Garza & Levine, 2005). In a recent study on gender and transition, girls were more likely than boys to report that people expect less of them because of their gender and because of their disability (Hogansen, Powers, Geenen, Gil-Kashiwabara, & Powers, 2008). To help ensure that young women with disabilities aim high and explore the possibility of postsecondary education for themselves, parents and high school teachers and counselors can encourage girls with disabilities to take college preparatory coursework, research two-year and four-year college programs, visit college campuses and meet with the admissions office to ask questions and gather information, find out whether the colleges that interest them have supportive resources such as women's centers and

organizations of students with disabilities, check out the accessibility of facilities, and if possible to talk with other students with disabilities (especially women with disabilities) who attend the school (they may be available through the school's office of disability support services or campus organizations for students with disabilities).

## Accommodation is the Law

In the U.S., access to postsecondary education by people with disabilities is mandated by federal legislation, specifically Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990. These laws require postsecondary institutions to provide accessible space and appropriate academic accommodations and auxiliary aids to students with disabilities. The great majority of U.S. colleges and universities are subject to one or both of these laws (U.S. Department of Education, 2007). However, postsecondary institutions are not required by law to modify their admission standards, programs, course content, or grade point average requirements (Madaus, 2005). Students interested in college must, therefore, be prepared for academic challenge, and advocate for the appropriate accommodations they need to successfully meet that challenge.

## Self-Disclosure and Planning

To receive academic accommodations as required by these laws, a student must be willing to formally identify herself as a student with a disability to the school's office of disability support services, and must be willing and able to advocate for herself to obtain appropriate accommodations. A college's disability support services office can require the provision of specific accommodations by the

school, such as priority registration, extended time on examinations, separate exam locations, recording devices, notetakers, interpreters, reduced credit load, substituting one course for another, and technology such as TTY in a dormitory or adaptive software or hardware on school computers (Madaus, 2005; U.S. Department of Education, 2007).

A college student with a disability should take the time to meet with someone in her college's disability support services office early on to find out what services are offered and how to access these services. Documentation of disability will be required to obtain services, and some schools require more documentation than others. An IEP or 504 plan from high school can help identify accommodations and auxiliary aids that may be helpful, but these documents are *not* sufficient to obtain services in college (U.S. Department of Education, 2007). However, diagnostic assessments done in high school that are less than three years old may be acceptable. Unlike K-12 schools, colleges are not required to conduct or pay for assessments, such as those required to document learning disabilities. A student and her parents may be able to reduce or avoid the cost of new assessments by keeping assessments up-to-date during high school, and by talking to her chosen college prior to high school graduation about required documentation.

Because students often see college as a "fresh start," an opportunity to escape the labels and roles of the past, some students with disabilities may avoid or delay contacting the disability support services office to request accommodations. For some, it will be possible to complete college without accommodations. For others, the need for services may not be apparent until they find themselves struggling to complete assignments or to do well on exams. Students encountering

difficulties should contact the disability support services office to discuss their options, but colleges are not required to provide accommodations retroactively (Madaus, 2005).

### Self-Advocacy Skills

All college students need self-advocacy skills, but for women with disabilities these skills may be even more critical. As a self-advocate, a student takes responsibility for understanding her disability; knowing her strengths and weaknesses, including those related to her disability; and being able to communicate requests for reasonable accommodations. Unfortunately, many students do not learn self-advocacy skills before they leave high school (Fiedler & Danneker, 2007).

Communication with college faculty is challenging for many students, but generally speaking students with disabilities are as willing and able to communicate with faculty as are students without disabilities. The exception is students with learning disabilities, who are more likely than others to report having communication difficulties with their instructors (Frymier & Wanzer, 2003). The most successful students with disabilities tend to use an assertive style of communication to request accommodations (Worley & Cornett-DeVito, 2007). However, male college students (with or without disabilities) report greater comfort in being assertive than female students, and students in two-year colleges are more comfortable being assertive than those in four-year colleges (Orr, 2004).

Parents and high school teachers can help young women with disabilities prepare for college by encouraging development of assertive communication skills. An example of an assertive approach to requesting academic accommodations is the following 17 steps (Palmer & Roessler, 2000, p. 39):

- Greet instructor
- Introduce self by name
- Refer to specific class
- Identify disability status
- Explain needs functionally

- Mention previous accommodations
- Explain benefits of past accommodations
- Request use of accommodations
- Identify resources and how they help
- Explain what you will do
- Ask for agreement
- Affirm agreement
- Restate accommodations
- Clarify your role
- Clarify your instructor's role
- Close with positive statement
- Express appreciation

### Campus Safety

Parental concerns for a daughter's safety can influence decisions about postsecondary life choices (Whitney-Thomas & Hanley Maxwell, 1996; Hogansen, Powers, Geenan, Gil-Kashiwabara, & Powers, 2008). While students are typically safer on campuses than in the cities or communities surrounding them, parents and students may reasonably be concerned about campus safety. The U.S. Department of Education's Office of Postsecondary Education has a Web site where it is possible to view the crime statistics for many U.S. campuses ([www.ope.ed.gov/security/main.asp](http://www.ope.ed.gov/security/main.asp)). Many campuses also have women's centers that offer training in personal safety, as well as free escort services during evening hours.

### Campus Accessibility

Many college and university Web sites provide accessibility maps showing ramps and elevators, as well as other information about building and room accessibility. Larger campuses may have bus or shuttle systems to help students get around campus quickly. During a campus visit, or at orientation, students can check out the transportation system and accessibility of buildings in order to know what to expect on the first day of classes. Students considering staying in dormitories should ask if they can see the rooms. In some cases, a college may

be able to make changes, such as removing an interior door or changing a handle. Students with special dietary needs or technology needs should also ask about what may or may not be provided by the college.

### Conclusion

Postsecondary education offers both challenge and opportunity to women with disabilities. With preparation, planning, and encouragement from their families, college can be a rewarding experience and a path to a fulfilling career.

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## How I Became a Successful Artist

by Kathy Donahue, with assistance of Dan Reed

I am your typical working woman in her 50s. I balance my life by juggling a busy work schedule, dabbling in several interests and hobbies, and spending time with my family and friends. But how I got to this point in my life was anything but typical – and that is my story.

I was born in Minneapolis, Minnesota, in 1951. Like many baby boomers, I come from a family with a few siblings. They were important in my life then, and my brother Jim and my sister Joyce remain a big part of my life today. School was a big struggle for me. I seemed to be bumped from school to school, always

***I don't think I actually had a real art class until 2001 when I took one at Partnership Resources, Inc. It was the first place that believed that I would get something out of formal art training.***

trying to find a school where I could fit in. I think the reason why I had to keep changing schools is that I needed special supports and hardly any schools even offered special education. One example of my troubles was that at one school some of the other kids were “shaking me down” for money. I actually took money out of my savings in hopes of not being beaten up. Once my family found out about it, they sent me to a different school. Back then, we really didn't feel welcome in schools – it was rough on me and my family.

One place I felt welcome was at Christ Child School in St. Paul. I learned a lot from Sister Anne Marie. She had a positive influence on my life. She got me

enrolled in the school. I am not sure what would have happened to me had I not gone there. They knew how to teach us so we could understand. She had faith that we could learn and encouraged us to succeed. I met a lot of good friends, some I am still friends with today. We connected with one another. In fact, we had a reunion a few years back. It was nice. We had a lot of great teachers. We even learned to square dance and made our own outfits.

After Christ Child, I attended Henry High School and graduated in 1970. High school was good. I liked it. My favorite classes were cooking, history and sewing. I went into regular classes but I had tutors help me in study halls. The tutors helped me a lot.

After graduation, I stayed living with my family and worked at a Chinese restaurant in downtown Minneapolis, bussing tables and doing dishes. My parents taught me many things including the importance of being independent and to be able to take care of myself. I strive to heed my parents' advice daily. I feel proud and happy that I am quite independent and self-confident. By working in restaurants, I learned a lot about people. I got to watch them and when bussing tables I got to talk to people. They got comfortable with me and I with them. I took the bus to work downtown – right in the middle of the action. I learned my way around Minneapolis, as well. It is fun to know what is going on around town, and to this day I try to attend as many community events as I am able. I love living in Minneapolis.

My father died when I was 27. My mother had passed away many years before, so I had to find a new place to live. I lived with my sister for a few years, but I wanted more independence. I ended up living in some pretty large group homes. Back then there were few options for people with disabilities to live in smaller settings such as houses or apartments. Twenty years ago, I moved out on my

own and have been independent since then. By living in my own apartment, I get to do what I want to do when I want to do it. That is a great feeling. I receive help on an occasional basis. In fact, I still receive assistance through the Supported Living Services. It is a really good program that keeps me on a good path. I can't imagine what would happen to people like me without their support.

### My Artistic Life

I always liked arts and crafts. My favorites are Christmas decorations. Holidays have always meant a lot to me – they inspire me. You can see it in my art. Holidays give me something to look forward to and to celebrate.

I am not the only person in my family who is interested in art. My brother and other relatives dabbled in art. It was always around me. But I don't think I actually had a real art class until 2001 at Partnership Resources, Inc. (PRI). PRI is

***The first time I saw a Picasso piece, I loved the angles. I like the way he looks at life differently. Perhaps, kind of like me. People tell me that they see Picasso in my work. What a compliment!***

an agency that supports adults with developmental disabilities through vocational, recreational and cultural opportunities. It was the first place that believed that I would get something out of formal art training.

At PRI I studied Japanese and Chinese art, Picasso, Georgia O'Keefe and Frida





Kahlo. I love studying how other artists draw what they see and feel. I try to relate to them and add my spin on it. I love seeing how it turns out.

From my art training I have gone in several different directions with my art. I produce art for PRI's Holiday Card line. My artwork is on the cover of some of the holiday cards (and also all-occasion cards). It is a wonderful feeling when I see people buying my holiday cards. By choosing one of my cards, it kind of says, "I see the importance of the holiday through the artist's eyes and heart." And those are *my* eyes and heart they are talking about. That feels nice. Beyond my holiday cards, recently I have ventured into other styles and techniques of painting.

My inspiration for my paintings comes from different places. For instance, the first time I saw a Picasso piece, I loved the angles. Real cool. I like the way he looks at life differently. Perhaps, kind of like me. I connected. People tell me that they see Picasso in my work. What a compliment! I am working on my own version of a Georgia O'Keefe painting. I love how my colors

are blending. I think it will sell well.

My pieces have touched others to the point that I have sold several of them. PRI exhibits our art, prints, cards and products throughout the Twin Cities at corporate headquarters, university settings, and retail stores, such as coffee, frame and gift shops. Our art is also displayed and sold at regional art fairs and PRI fundraisers and celebrations. Much of our artwork is also available on the PRI Web site. We often hold "Meet the Artist" luncheons and receptions where the public gets to meet us and hear our stories. It gives us a chance to form a bond with our hosts. We often make friendships from our partnerships. Quite often my art is purchased by the host exhibitor. People buy art from artists that they identify with. It really works

well. PRI plays a big role in our success, marketing and supporting us all along the way. I believe that a bond is formed when someone buys my art. It is a wonderful feeling.

I am working on an interesting piece right now. I love angels and I am combining my love for angels with a likeness of me. I guess it is kind of a self-portrait that combines who I am and who I would like to be. I want to share with others what I love about life through my art.

My advice for other women who want to be artists is to find a good art teacher and a good organization to partner with. It makes a world of difference. Being an artist doesn't mean you have to go it alone. Check out organizations that might be a good fit for you and go for it. Be prepared to supplement your art work with a paying job. It keeps money coming in and keeps you in front of people.

*Kathy Donahue lives in Minneapolis, Minnesota. To view the PRI card line featuring art by Kathy and other artists, or to learn more about upcoming exhibits of artwork, visit [www.partnershipresources.org](http://www.partnershipresources.org) and select "PARTnerships."*

## Resources: Education and Women With Disabilities

### • **Expanding Career Options for Young Women with Learning Disabilities.**

*By L. Lindstrom, M. Benz, & B. Doren.*

*Published in the journal Career Development for Exceptional Individuals, (27)1, 2004. The article reports the findings of a study that examined the barriers and facilitators to career choice for young women with learning disabilities who graduated from high school and entered the workforce. Findings show that those who had a solid foundation of employment experiences, coupled with opportunities to explore and refine career goals, were more likely to enter employment related to their interests and goals.*

• **TransitiontoCollege.net.** On this Web site are extensive information and resources for colleges seeking to develop or improve college options, programs, and services for students with intellectual disabilities, as well as checklists, tips and other resources for students and parents. The information covers postsecondary education as well as employment. The site is sponsored by the Postsecondary Education Research Center (PERC), which is coordinated by TransCen, Inc.

• **DO-IT: Disabilities, Opportunities, Internetworking and Technology ([www.washington.edu/doi](http://www.washington.edu/doi)).** The Web site of this project at the University of Washington has resources to increase the participation of individuals with disabilities in challenging academic programs and careers. In the "Postsecondary Education" section of the site are resources to help postsecondary educators create accessible environments and programs for students with disabilities, and resources for students and families to help students with disabilities prepare for and succeed in college.

## ***Keep Off Your Feet, But Keep Your Head: A Story of Disability, Theology and Work***

by Nancy Eiesland

I vividly recall the first time I thought seriously about what I would do as a grown-up. I was seven years old and being fitted for a full leg brace and crutches at the Crippled Children's School in Jamestown, North Dakota. As I emerged from the prosthetics workshop, shining with steel bars and white hightop "toddler" shoes, my father said, "You're going to need to get a job that keeps you off your feet. You'll never be a check-out clerk." His advice and prediction was apt and accurate, but the specifics of my life's trajectory were inconceivable to him and me.

*My first theological mentor responded to my expressed gloom about the missing story of disability in American Christianity and theology by telling me to write it. I began the account that would become the book "The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability."*

The life I have now as a professor, theological advocate, wife, and mother would have been unthinkable then, as it was generally assumed that I would need my parents' financial and medical support all my life. I realized that folks thought I was unlikely to marry and still less likely to have a child. Sustaining a career in academia, teaching and working closely with theological and doctoral students, writing books on disability

theology and other topics, travelling internationally lecturing, working with the United Nations agencies and committees on the UN Convention on the Rights and Dignity of People with Disabilities, and working with the European Union groups as they seek to interpret the meaning of the right of spirituality for all people with disabilities – these possibilities were unimaginable.

I am the fifth in a family of six children, reared on a small family farm near Pleasant Lake, North Dakota, where, when I was young, there was neither a lake nor was it particularly pleasing. During my early years in Wolford Elementary School, I became a "poster child" for a national organization seeking to prevent the "tragedy" of my body. As a spokesperson I processed through classrooms asking children to give their dimes and nickels so that one day there would be no more folks like me. The poise I learned in telling my story served me well as I later began my life as an educator and advocate, but it also often came at substantial personal cost as my body became the lesson, and the words I was schooled to say were uncomfortable beliefs about me.

At age 18 I followed in the footsteps of my elder brother and two of my elder sisters and enrolled at the University of North Dakota. I declared my major to be public relations, a field designed for my skills. But as I worked my way into this line of work, I found that the experience of personal objectification I had felt as a "poster child" was a staple in the industry. Then, during my first year at college, on the day after Christmas 1982, my beloved elder sister Susanne Chole was killed in an automobile accident in South Dakota. This tragic loss changed the trajectory of my life. I quickly decided that I would join my family as they moved, selling the family farm in North Dakota to begin anew in Springfield, Missouri – the



center of the Assemblies of God (AG) church in the U.S.

I enrolled at Central Bible College, an AG school, following a clear calling that I was to do something to alleviate the pain in the world and to use my life-long disability in ministry. Thus, I sought to make true the promises that the Assemblies of God ordained women, graduating as valedictorian in 1986 and ordained as an Assemblies of God minister within a year. I was ordained for several years, serving as an evangelist, until my ideas as a woman with a disability had pushed beyond AG denominational orthodoxy. But during this time, I began preparing for the work that I had long believed was my calling – hospital chaplaincy. Since I spent many months in hospitals during my young life and knew the routines of hospital care so intimately, it seemed a natural fit.

I began work on my Masters of Divinity (M.Div.) at Candler School of Theology in Atlanta, and as part of my program did an intensive basic unit of

Clinical Pastoral Education at Georgia Baptist Hospital (now Atlanta Medical Center). Armed with a Bible, an Introduction to Pastoral Care class, and a pager, I went out to be a chaplain.

Luckily, I worked with Chaplain Emmanuel Williams, an Assemblies of God clergyman, who with his military bearing taught me to *stop* whatever I was thinking as I went out, *look* for signs of what is really happening on the floors and in the rooms, and *listen* to the word of God, the insights of the hospital staff, and the manner of the patient and family. He chuckled at my developed theory of “healing presence” and simply said, “Doesn’t it make you nervous if someone just sits there and doesn’t say something?” His style was to go in, learn what was needed, do what he could, and get out. To this day, when I awake from a drug-induced haze after surgeries I only want to see the faces of two people – my husband and my mother. “Get in, do God’s business, and get out” are good words that Reverend Williams taught generations of would-be chaplains. My time as a chaplain-in-training taught me many things, but ultimately I decided not to be a chaplain because God could use my early life in hospital for many more things than I could imagine.

At Candler, my first theological mentor, Dr. Rebecca Chopp (now president of Colgate University), responded to my expressed gloom about the missing story of disability in American Christianity and theology by telling me to write it. I began the account that would become the book *The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability* as my Master’s thesis. Though I barely mention my own story there, the work seemed so deeply personal that even sharing it with my professors made me anxious beyond words. Yet, as I showed my account to other people with physical disabilities, in particular, they often found much that resonated with their own experience.

Graduating with my M.Div. in 1991, I immediately began my doctoral program at Emory University, and graduated from the program in sociology of

religion in 1995. That year I was hired by Candler School of Theology as a sociologist of religion, though I continued to write and lecture in disability studies in religion. Now a tenured professor with 13 years at Candler and Emory, I work equally in theology and disability studies, and in the study of American religion. I love my teaching, writing, and research, and try diligently to wobble between work and parenting my six-year-old daughter with my husband of 22 years, Terry.

I continue to work out implications of being a disabled woman in Christian circles as I have journeyed from Ireland to India and many places beyond – listening to accounts that both resound with familiarity and yet are culturally and theologically distinctive. I have learned an academic and more a spiritual habit of “just listening” – listening for the claims of justice that are made in everyday life. I’ve learned that those people whose verbal communicative skills are underdeveloped nevertheless claim me, letting me know that I am one of God’s children.

Finally about four years ago, I literally fell down on the job. At a gathering for incoming graduate students, my chair crumbled and I with it. More concernedly, my lumbar back became a mass of fractures, hair-line fractures, and swollen spinal cord. For the past four years I have had many surgeries as they sought to stabilize my spine and to alleviate some of the pain. For much of the 2007-08 school year I was on bedrest in and out of hospitals as doctors tried every which way to cure a drug-resistant staph infection.

Working with folks who have committed themselves to teaching and supporting others in their religious and other vocations sometimes means we hold very high standards for ourselves and for others. I have learned through many years teaching, writing, and advocating, that spiritual standards are not primarily high or low: they are accessible or unapproachable. This past year my colleagues, acting in faith, took over my classes, carried my loads, called the

meetings that I was supposed to do, and cared for students for whom I was unable. I am deeply grateful. In every vocation, whether we are privileged to be teachers, advocates, and writers, or follow another calling, we must take to heart that in every work life some suffering will be suffered. At times we will not be as productive, reliable, or energetic as once we were. When we participate in communities of work in which this reality of life is known, we may give our aid when someone else’s difficulty comes to the fore, and receive it from others in our times of need.

*Now a tenured professor, I work equally in theology and disability studies, and in the study of American religion. God has had much more to make of my life than I could imagine, as I have kept off my feet and tried to keep my head passionately committed.*

Life is full, and my work colleagues are generous and level-headed, as is my family. God has had much more to make of my life than I could imagine, as I have kept off my feet and tried to keep my head passionately committed.

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## My “Crooked” Path to Science

by Lauren Summers

I never planned on a science career. I have cerebral palsy, which affects my speech and muscle coordination movements. Throughout my education years, science was difficult to master and no one encouraged me to understand scientific theories, hypotheses, chemical reactions, and factual frameworks. My lack of fine motor skills prevented me from dissecting a frog, diagramming a hibiscus flower, and mixing chemicals in test tubes. Field trips were hard on me. Science was not much fun.

Why was science so difficult for me? My deep curiosity about the world and

disability. Many things interested me, but upon graduation I was no closer to understanding what I really wanted to do.

My friends were not disabled. I had grown up trying to fit into “normal” society, constantly trying to prove to others that I was smart and capable. We never discussed my disability, and it was many years before I could admit to the loneliness of not having a peer who could understand my issues.

In my mid 20s, I met a scientist – an inventor – who, even before a motorcycle accident left him with paraplegia, had decided to let nothing deter him from pursuing his dreams. We talked for hours and his confidence about himself contradicted every negative thing I ever thought about disability. He traveled to underdeveloped countries, setting up workshops for people with disabilities that taught them to build wheelchairs from found materials that fit their needs and adapted to the terrain of their environment. My friend had a supportive group of friends with and without disabilities to cheer him on and help him discover the technology that made his work possible. I was awed by the role science played in his life and his determination in making a respected place for himself as an engineer.

My friend encouraged me to work at a local center for independent living, a consumer-based organization. I was hired to create and manage a peer counseling program. It was a great experience but, after five years, a change in staff and program objectives led me to pursue other opportunities. However, this experience was an important step for me in integrating disability and work, and it set the stage for a career yet to come.

A few years later, when I was again job hunting, another friend mentioned an opening at a prestigious science organization. The details implied the job had to do with the recruitment and retention of engineering students with disabilities. The director of a project on science,



technology and disability was seeking a person with a disability who would build connections with scientists and engineers with disabilities. I felt excited, but wondered if I would actually qualify. Would I have the skills and confidence to talk to scientists?

After my initial conversation with the director, I thought, “If I could talk to this woman once a week for the rest of my life, everything would be okay.” She was smart, direct, and welcoming. I knew that if I was hired, working for her would push me in new ways and her expectations would be high. I also sensed that her attitude towards me would always be fair.

In 1991, I accepted the position as a Program Associate with the Project on Science, Technology and Disability at the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS). My major role was to provide technical assistance to students with disabilities, parents, teachers, counselors, and other interested people on making science classrooms and curricula accessible to students and scientists with disabilities. There were many scientists with disabilities who found unique coping skills and support systems that assisted them to persevere in science education and professional STEM (Science, Technology,

*My own crooked path began when I left the sheltered life of a girl with a disability. Science was the path that encouraged me to grow professionally and personally and to pursue all of my dreams.*

my eagerness to make sense of my own life somehow seemed scientific in and of itself. If the role of a scientist is to formulate, experiment, and examine interesting theories that would result in new discoveries, couldn't that definition be applicable to me? And, isn't every person a potential scientist because we all must experiment, explore, try, fail, and finally discover the best education and career opportunities that will allow each of us the fullest life possible? And yet...

I graduated from college with a Liberal Arts degree, not having been too encouraged to find and understand my strengths. It seemed difficult for my professors to know exactly what to do with, or expect from, a student with a

Engineering and Mathematics) careers. They became role models for others. Any hesitation I felt about talking to “important” people in the field was overcome by my excitement in assisting students, scientists, and other professionals with disabilities in the field to connect with each other.

Despite the success of many scientists with disabilities, and as a result of her research from the engineering project under which I was hired, my director discovered that there were few employment opportunities being offered to new graduates with disabilities in science and engineering. It was quite timely when, in 1996, the project was asked to manage a summer internship program for college students with disabilities at NASA’s Goddard Space Flight Center located in Greenbelt, Maryland. I was asked to find seven students with disabilities from colleges and universities across the country to participate in Goddard’s 10-week summer internship program. I e-mailed every disability service coordinator at as many universities I could think of, seeking a diverse pool of talented technical students with disabilities.

My director gave me a lot of freedom to build the program and I changed many of the practices instituted by the former coordinator. For example, instead of checking in on them every other day, I visited every other week; instead of meeting the interns all together in one location, I visited each student at their worksite to get a bigger picture of what their day was like; instead of taking them to baseball games, I took them to Congress. I trusted them to work hard. I knew they could figure out how to get around the city on weekends for entertainment, and I was having a good time bashing through more stereotypes about my folks.

In 1997, the program expanded agency-wide and I took the initiative to build relationships with internship coordinators at NASA sites throughout the country. We named the program ACCESS (Achieving Competency in Computing, Engineering and Space Science), and NASA defined it as an

exposure and feeder program to mainstream co-ops and other NASA programs that could lead to permanent employment. ACCESS became the model for other organizations who became our partners and offered similar internship opportunities.

When NASA folks hesitated about bringing on students with disabilities, I took them to lunch and asked them about their lives. My interest in them sparked their interest in me and, suddenly, they wanted more details on the program. It was an incredible insight and taught me so much about recruiting “champions” for the program.

It was tremendous support from friends, a wonderful husband, a smart, sassy daughter, and a boss who believed in my abilities (even when I did not!) that led me to discover the work that would make me happy. I find myself encouraging many people, and especially young women, to build a personal life as big and as satisfying as they want their professional lives to be. One will nourish and sustain the other.

Many of the ACCESS interns have gone down “crooked” paths to finally discover what their true talents were. My own crooked path began when I left the sheltered life of a girl with a disability. I struggled, determinedly, to find the relationships and the work that would make me happy. Science was the path that encouraged me to grow professionally and personally and to pursue all of my dreams.

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## Resources: Women in Science, Technology, Engineering and Math

• **Girl Geeks ([www.girlgeeks.org](http://www.girlgeeks.org)).** This Web site is an online community for women and girls interested in technology and computing. It includes career information, personal success stories, profiles of role models, technical tips, and an extensive list of other resources and programs.

• **Roadmaps and Rampways: Profiles of Students with Disabilities in Science, Mathematics, Engineering and Technology (<http://ehrweb.aaas.org/rr/index.html>).** On this Web site are personal stories of 11 young women with disabilities pursuing careers and higher education in science, math, engineering and technology fields. They participated in the Entry Point! Program of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, a program offering internship opportunities in those fields for students with disabilities (see [www.entrypoint.org](http://www.entrypoint.org)).

• **IBM Women in the Women in Technology International Hall of Fame ([www-03.ibm.com/ibm/history/witexhibit/wit\\_hall.html](http://www-03.ibm.com/ibm/history/witexhibit/wit_hall.html)).** Included in this online Hall of Fame are video clips and the transcript from an interview with Chieko Asakawa, who is responsible for the research and development of IBM software and applications that significantly improve Web accessibility for people with visual impairments and other disabilities. She became blind as a teenager, and has been doing computer accessibility research since the 1980s.

# Career Development: Improving Options and Opportunities for Women With Disabilities

by Lauren Lindstrom

Career development is the process of identifying and refining career goals. Traditional career development theories often describe career choice as a one-time event that is logical and linear. However, for women with disabilities the career development process is more complex. Making a decision about employment options means taking into account a number of interrelated factors including individual abilities and disabilities, family support, opportunities for education and training, and barriers and supports in the workplace (Lindstrom, Benz, & Doren, 2004). Career aspirations also unfold and change over time. Over the

*There are a number of strategies professionals can use to assist women with disabilities in achieving career success.*

course of a lifetime, a woman with a disability may make numerous career decisions and follow a number of career paths. Her experiences and options may be constrained by disability and gender barriers and her career decision-making process will most likely be multifaceted, discontinuous, and unpredictable (Szymanski, Enright, Hershenson, & Ettinger, 2003; Noonan et al., 2004).

What do employment and education professionals need to know about career development to help women with disabilities make informed career choices and achieve positive employment outcomes? This brief article provides information about career choice and career advancement, and includes strategies for

proactive career development for women with a variety of disabilities.

## Career Choice

Choosing an occupation is a critical piece of career development. Most individuals with disabilities want the opportunity to work in the community, and holding a job can contribute to self-esteem and personal satisfaction (Szymanski et al., 2003). Career choice is also highly related to an individual's self-concept, which can be defined as "who one is and who one is not... Self-concept also includes who one expects or would like to be" (Gottfredson, 1981, p. 547).

Women with disabilities face a double jeopardy situation when selecting a meaningful career. Their options may be limited by gender roles as well as disability stereotypes. Although women have made many advances in entering male-dominated fields such as law and medicine, many occupations are still divided along traditional gender lines. For example, more than 90% of preschool and kindergarten teachers, secretaries, and housekeepers are women, while women represent only a small proportion of workers in the well-paid skilled trades and protective occupations such as police officers and firefighters (Betz, 2005). Low expectations for individuals with disabilities, lack of family support, and disability discrimination may further limit employment options for women with disabilities preparing to either enter the workforce or make a career change. Thus the "choice" of a job is by default a selection from a narrow range of options.

## Career Advancement

Despite the restricted range of career options, there are countless benefits for women with disabilities who are employed. First, working outside the

home allows women to develop their unique abilities and talents, and contributes to personal fulfillment and positive psychological adjustment (Betz, 2005). Exposure to a variety of occupations can also help women further define and refine career goals, and explore a wider variety of potential career options. In addition, making a positive contribution in the workplace builds skills and confidence and increases potential for future advancement and higher wage opportunities (Lindstrom et al., 2004).

In her study of high-achieving women with physical and sensory disabilities, Noonan (2004) and her colleagues examined a number of important influences on career development. The majority of the participants displayed a strong self-concept that allowed them to maintain self-confidence and determination to succeed despite numerous barriers. Many described themselves as "persistent, determined, or tenacious" (Noonan et al., 2004, p. 73) when faced with discrimination, lack of accommodations, pay inequities, or general discouragement for their careers. All the women in the study also identified the importance of ongoing tangible and emotional support from peers, supervisors, family, and friends. Other researchers have confirmed the important role that female mentors and role models can play in encouraging career stability and advancement for women with disabilities (Lindstrom & Benz, 2002; Betz, 2005).

## Strategies for Success

There are a number of strategies that employment and education professionals can use to assist women with disabilities in obtaining meaningful employment and achieving career success. The following suggestions encompass career decision-making and career advancement:



- *Career Information.* Offer individual or group sessions that include topics such as (a) occupational knowledge, (b) self-knowledge, (c) disability awareness, (d) career decision-making skills, (e) gender roles/ stereotypes, and (f) role of family and friends in career development.
- *Career Exploration.* Create opportunities for more extensive exploration prior to selecting a job placement. Offer hands-on learning experiences and/or paid or non-paid community-based work experience to broaden the range of options considered.
- *Coping Skills.* Help women with disabilities develop individual attributes that contribute to career success such as persistence, flexibility, optimism, self-reliance, problem-solving skills, decision-making strategies, goal setting, risk taking, and empowerment.
- *Career Choice.* Stress decisions that eliminate the fewest options and develop all possibilities, including those not reinforced by gender stereotyping. Provide assistance in applying for nontraditional, technical and other high wage jobs.
- *Job Matching.* Focus on obtaining jobs that are a good “fit,” that utilize strengths and abilities, and provide opportunities for advancement.
- *Job Environment.* Identify needed accommodations, and address environmental, social or attitudinal barriers early in the job placement process. Clarify performance expectations and evaluation procedures.
- *Education and Training.* Provide opportunities to learn on the job or enroll in continuing training to be able to advance. Encourage high quality and extensive education and training. Consider technical schools, and two-year and community college programs.
- *Workplace Support.* Utilize peers, supervisors, and other colleagues to develop support systems at work. Encourage and/or provide opportunities for women with disabilities to develop connections with female mentors and role models.

With the right combination of skills and supports, women with disabilities can be highly successful in achieving their career goals.

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## Findings on Gender Differences in Employment of Individuals Receiving Rehabilitation Services

*Federal policy shifts over the last two decades have led to increased emphasis on supporting people with disabilities to enter integrated employment. Even so, there remains a significant gap in employment rates between people with and without disabilities, and the situation for women with developmental disabilities (DD) in particular is problematic.*

*A study of employment outcomes of 706 men and women with DD who recently entered individual employment with the support of a community rehabilitation provider was conducted between 2004 and 2005 by the Institute for Community Inclusion at the University of Massachusetts, Boston. The findings, based on an analysis of the National Survey of Community Rehabilitation Providers – Individual Employment Outcomes Survey, suggest that while men and*

*women with DD are earning meaningful wages, women with DD are working fewer hours in low wage jobs and earn less money, although only the latter was found to be statistically significant. On average, men worked more hours than women (24 versus 20). Most men and women worked part-time while 21% of men and 15% of women worked full-time (more than 36 hours per week). On average, men earned more than women; the median weekly wage was \$152 for men and \$127 for women. Gender differences across all wage ranges were significant. Findings also showed that men earned more on average than women in almost all job types, except assembly, manufacturing, and clerical jobs. No significant gender differences were found in regard to client access to benefits such as paid time-off*

*and health care. Significant gender differences were found, however, with respect to the types of jobs men and women with DD held in individual employment. More women than men worked in food services and clerical services, while more men worked in the maintenance and janitorial sector, in assembly, manufacturing, and packaging.*

*Effective employment supports need to provide access to a full range of occupations and address individual interests and economic priorities. Both men and women with DD fall short of earning a living wage, and these survey data suggest that respondents lack access to the full range of job options.*

Contributed by Heike Boeltzig, Jaimie C. Timmons, and John Butterworth, researchers at the Institute for Community Inclusion, University of Massachusetts, Boston. For the complete report of the study's findings visit [http://communityinclusion.org/pdf/RP46\\_F.pdf](http://communityinclusion.org/pdf/RP46_F.pdf).

[Ely, continued from page 1]

soon as I graduated from college, I would land a great paying job as either a speech language pathologist or a remedial reading teacher, marry a psychologist, move into an accessible three-bedroom home, and have a daughter (I didn't want much, did I?). Along the way, I found out that there were people who did not think my goals were realistic. After graduating from high school, vocational rehabilitation services referred me to a psychologist to determine whether I could handle the rigors of attending college. He felt the answer was no, not for lack of ability, rather because he thought I wouldn't be able to handle the stress of exams and deadlines for papers, or keep up with reading assignments. My mother was with me at the time and she disagreed vehemently, so in the fall of that year I was sitting in the classrooms of a junior college in Chicago, continuing to "get it in my head" despite his doubts.

About four years later, we moved back to Minneapolis, and I transferred to the University of Minnesota. While a senior majoring in Elementary Education I again ran into someone else's lowered expectations of what I would be able to accomplish. A professor told me, "You know, you're a very pretty girl...I'm sure it won't be long until you're married. Why don't you just get a job as a teacher's aide, work from 10-2, and let your husband take care of you?". At the time he said this I had left student teaching after two weeks because of discipline problems with my students and was feeling like quitting – just as I was about to graduate. However, after that remark I knew I would get my degree. I was not about to give in to such a sexist and insensitive way of thinking about my gender or disability!

In June 1982, I got a Bachelor of Science degree because I knew that I was capable, and I realized that I had come too far not to finish what I had started. Since I did not complete my student teaching experience, I could not get a degree in Elementary Education. However, I was fortunate enough to be able to keep the credits I had earned; I added a minor in English and graduated. Then I started

looking for the great paying job that I believed to be right around the corner just waiting for me to find it. Much to my surprise, there was no fantasy job waiting for me. The next eight years found me doing volunteer work and I was laid-off from a couple of low-paying positions when they ran out of funding for me.

In October 1990, I got a job as an information and referral specialist at an early childhood resource center. I ran computerized searches for licensed childcare providers based on the criteria specified by parents who called our office looking for day care. I started working there at about \$7.61 an hour, a huge disappointment as far as the expectations that I had placed on myself. However, this job taught me my first computer skills, taught me how to handle difficult situations, and helped to sharpen my problem-solving skills. Because I was a person with a disability who was at ease listening to and advising parents of children with disabilities who were having difficulty finding childcare, eventually all calls were transferred to me when they involved a family with a child who had, or was thought to have, a disability.

From there, I became Information and Referral Coordinator at United Cerebral Palsy of Minnesota and the calls that I received became more diverse and complicated – about everything from Social Security to sexuality. Always learning, "get it in your head" stuck with me.

Today, I am a Community Program Specialist at the Institute on Community Integration. My job entails outreach to communities of color who may not be

aware of available services for those with disabilities, and working toward increasing the number of persons with disabilities who are competitively employed. Looking back on what I have learned in the process of getting here, the advice I would give to women with disabilities who are dealing with double or triple jeopardy is the following:

- Ask for assistance when you need it, and if something does not work out, figure out where things fell apart, fix it to the best of your ability, and **keep moving!**
- I think that family is always the front-line of support, but if that's not true for you, find it in teachers, friends (and/or their parents), mentors, or anyone else who gives you positive feedback and makes you feel good about yourself and the person you are evolving into.
- Find your passion and pursue it as if it is a vital part of who and what you are, because unless you are a morning person, which I am not, doing what you love makes getting out of bed just a little easier.

Therefore, my grandmother was right. If you "get it in your head," there will be bumps in the road but you can be a person of color, female, and have a disability and prove the doubters wrong.

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[Taylor-Ritzler, continued from page 19]

*The following are recommendations that can support school completion by teen moms with LD, based on this study:*

*1. Assess and assist moms to address deficits in their support at home, including:*

- *Stability, quality and affordability of child care. If they do not have child care they cannot attend to and complete their education.*
- *Encouragement related to school. Without encouragement the challenges of motherhood make it difficult to meet the demands of school.*

*2. Assess and assist moms with LD to address deficits in their support at school, including teacher support, relationships with peers, and enrollment and attendance policies.*

**Reference:** National Longitudinal Transition Study. (2001). Retrieved 1/16/01 from [www.sri.com/policy/cehs/nlts/nltssum.html](http://www.sri.com/policy/cehs/nlts/nltssum.html).

Contributed by Tina Taylor-Ritzler, Project Director, Department of Disability and Human Development, University of Illinois at Chicago. She may be reached at 312/413-4149 or [tritzler@uic.edu](mailto:tritzler@uic.edu). For complete findings of the study contact Dr. Taylor-Ritzler.

[O'Day and Foley, continued from page 5]

administrative support or service sector occupations. These occupations may be more frequently part-time positions that offer more flexibility in the work week, a distinct advantage to those who may have caregiving responsibilities, unpredictable chronic health issues, or educational pursuits. And although the number of employees in service occupations is projected to rise faster than any other occupational category during the next 10 years, they also tend to be the lowest paid and least likely to be covered by health insurance and other benefits (see [www.bls.gov/oco/oco2003.htm](http://www.bls.gov/oco/oco2003.htm)).

Women with disabilities are more likely than other women to be employed in the service sector, in occupations such as food preparation, building and grounds maintenance, dental and medical assistant, and personal care. They also participate in blue collar occupations at higher rates than women without disabilities. They are less likely to be in professional/technical occupations, such as teacher, lawyer, and counselor. Reasons for these occupational patterns are not well understood.

This data raises several interesting questions. Answering them may do much to improve employment outcomes for all individuals with disabilities:

- Are women with different types of disabilities (e.g., sensory, physical, intellectual) concentrated in different occupations than their male peers and for what advantage or disadvantage?
- Why are women with disabilities employed in professional/technical occupations at higher rates than men with disabilities?
- The category of professional/technical occupations is very broad, including highly skilled occupations such as computer programmers and technicians, actuaries and accountants, architects, scientists, and community and social services occupations. Where are women with disabilities concentrated within this occupational category?
- How does occupational category of employment correlate with type of disability, race, or educational status?

## Conclusion

Women and men with disabilities face many of the same employment issues, such as work disincentives, transportation barriers, lack of training or skills, and discrimination (see [www.ncd.gov/newsroom/publications/index.htm](http://www.ncd.gov/newsroom/publications/index.htm) for several reports that document employment barriers). While women with disabilities have made major strides in education and employment in recent decades, there are significant differences in the nature of their workforce participation compared to their male peers with, and their female peers without, disabilities. The diversity of women with disabilities defies blanket statements about workplace issues as multiple characteristics may combine to influence work status. The paucity of information about how gender, race, and disability interact in the workplace makes it difficult to confidently determine what factors assist or hinder women with disabilities. Further efforts to understand and disentangle the complex web that women with disabilities, particularly those in poverty, face in participating in the workforce are much needed.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> This estimate is based on data from the Current Population Survey 2004. Persons with a disability are those who have a "health problem or disability which prevents them from working or which limits the kind or amount of work they can do."

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**Table 4: Occupations of Men and Women With and Without Disabilities, 2004:  
Percent Employed in Each Type of Work**

Occupation	Men with Disabilities	Men without Disabilities	Total Men	Women with Disabilities	Women without Disabilities	Total Women
Administrative Support	7.74	6.7	6.77	22.3	22.21	22.22
Agriculture	1.52	1.23	1.25	1.03	0.97	0.97
Blue Collar	42.22	36.25	36.67	10.53	7.01	7.25
Management	8.26	11.27	11.06	5.36	7.72	7.55
Management Related	2.56	3.76	3.68	3.41	5.13	5.01
Professional/Technical	11.2	16.7	16.32	18.85	25.22	24.78
Sales	9.61	10.93	10.84	12.06	12.16	12.16
Service	16.88	13.15	13.41	26.45	19.58	20.06

Data from American Community Survey (2006)



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*Feature Issue on Employment and Women With Disabilities*

*Volume 21 · Number 1 · Summer/Fall 2008*

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*Impact* is published by the Institute on Community Integration (UCEDD), and the Research and Training Center on Community Living and Employment, College of Education and Human Development, University of Minnesota. This issue was supported, in part, by Grant #90DD0654 from the Administration on Developmental Disabilities, US Department of Health and Human Services; and Grant #H133B080005 from the National Institute on Disability and Rehabilitation Research, US Department of Education.

The opinions expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Institute, Center, University, or their funding sources.

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