

Transition to work presentation

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Jeff Berg and Van Berg

Jeff: Several years ago, when Van was fifteen, he attended a program of confirmation at our church. We worried that he wouldn't be able to keep up with the typical youth in this program, but our concerns were met with the phrase that we continue to apply to the many experiences he is exposed to: He'll get what he gets, just like the rest of us get what we get from life. One of the things he "got" in the program was to create his "Rules for Living." He wrote them on a piece of lined paper that we have hanging in our kitchen — and I'd like him to read them to you:

Van: These are my rules for living:

- 1. Be nice to people**
- 2. Do good work**
- 3. Make art**
- 4. Be healthy**

Jeff: I don't think there's anything else one could add to these rules for a full life.

Today we're here to talk about his second rule for living, "Do good work," and how it came about.

Van, now age 29, has been working for eight years at the Clinical Center, the main hospital at the National Institutes of Health, NIH. He works in the Patient Transport department, and he has a number of duties to fulfill in the five hours he works each weekday.

Van, please tell us what your job duties are?

He has twice-daily specimen rounds, during which he travels through the entire hospital on scheduled rounds with a heavy cart to collect and deliver lab samples. He is tasked with bringing broken medical equipment to the repair departments. He collects wheelchairs from every corner of the hospital, cleans them, and prepares them for their next usage. This is real work: these tasks are among the zillions of tasks necessary for the center to function and to maintain its accreditation.

He is successful in his job because it plays to his skills and talents. He has a great sense of direction, which is critical in that huge hospital setting, and he loves routine. Other workers get bored with the same thing every day, but Van thrives in the routine. He loves people: his job allows him contact with hundreds of other workers in the hospital, and he interacts with dozens of the same workers every day, with whom he's established special relationships in the way only he can. If I visit the hospital, everyone knows Van and says hello. People stop when he introduces me as his father to say what a great guy he is. He gets birthday cards signed with dozens of names, and messages like, "thank you for making us happy every day."

Similar to all young people entering the workforce, this perfect job for Van wasn't an immediate fit. His path began at 18 months old when he attended an early intervention program with Easter Seals. At age three, we tried a half a year of public pre-school, but his needs were greater than what they could provide. At age four, Van was enrolled, with our city's assistance, in a private special education school. The therapies and intensive, tailored learning begun there continued through until he graduated from high school at the age of 22.

For all those years, he learned to read and write, and other basic academic skills and living skills. After age 9, focus was given to community safety skills—such as how to safely cross a street, which he still needs help with, and city living—such as how to ride the subway, which he now does on his own.

The first day he rode the Metro by himself to work was one of the most terrifying days of our lives. But his love of the subway system and years of familiarity gave him, and us, the confidence for him to take the Metro to and from work by himself.

His preferences and skills came to light through a variety of job trials. Being around people, especially peers, was an important aspect of his enjoyment with work, though he needed to be reminded not to socialize too much. Routine without too many fine motor skills was another preference. Being physically active was helpful to his concentration and focus—so not a desk job.

During his last year of school, he started a new program called Project Search, a one-year program that is a collaboration between his school and an adult service provider, SEEC, that is targeted to assist youth to transition from school to work. Project Search brings together, in partnership, the feeder school, the state or municipal disability agency, and a large worksite. In Washington DC, the worksites include the Smithsonian Institution, the National Institutes of Health, and Hilton. Other employers that have become partners in Project Search nationwide include hospitals, corporations, banks, and universities, among others.

NIH has a huge campus right outside of Washington, DC, that includes both the clinical center where Van works, and numerous other buildings that house various divisions of the Institute, including many office settings for Project Search workers who find fulfillment in data entry or other office work, sterilizing equipment, at the loading dock, doing pharmaceutical inventory, in the cafeterias, and many other positions.

Van tried a few jobs out and was a natural in Patient Transport, and additional training made him an ace employee. He was the first Project Search worker hired in their inaugural year with NIH, and has gained a few additional tasks since he was hired. He is supervised just like his peers, but has the addition of a SEEC job coach funded by the city's disability services agency.

The job coach monitors Van's success and steps in as needed. For example, when more complex tasks come up, the job coach will analyze the task, break it down into manageable steps, and train Van so that he learns to master them. The job coach is in close communication with Van's

supervisor and intervenes when there are concerns about his performance, all to continue to guarantee Van's success on the job. For example, there have been instances when Van didn't understand certain rules: the job coach worked with Van and the employer to ensure Van's success and compliance. The key is that a working partnership is formed through which the employer's needs are fully met.

And the employee's needs ... like all other employees, Van pays taxes, receives employee benefits, and enjoys the responsibility and pride that come with real work well done.

Van, do you have anything else you'd like to add about your work?

Van: My work is important to me. I work hard, I do work that the hospital needs, and I earn money. I care about my job. It helps me grow and be independent. Like my second rule said, I do good work. Isn't that what anybody wants from their job?

Thank you.