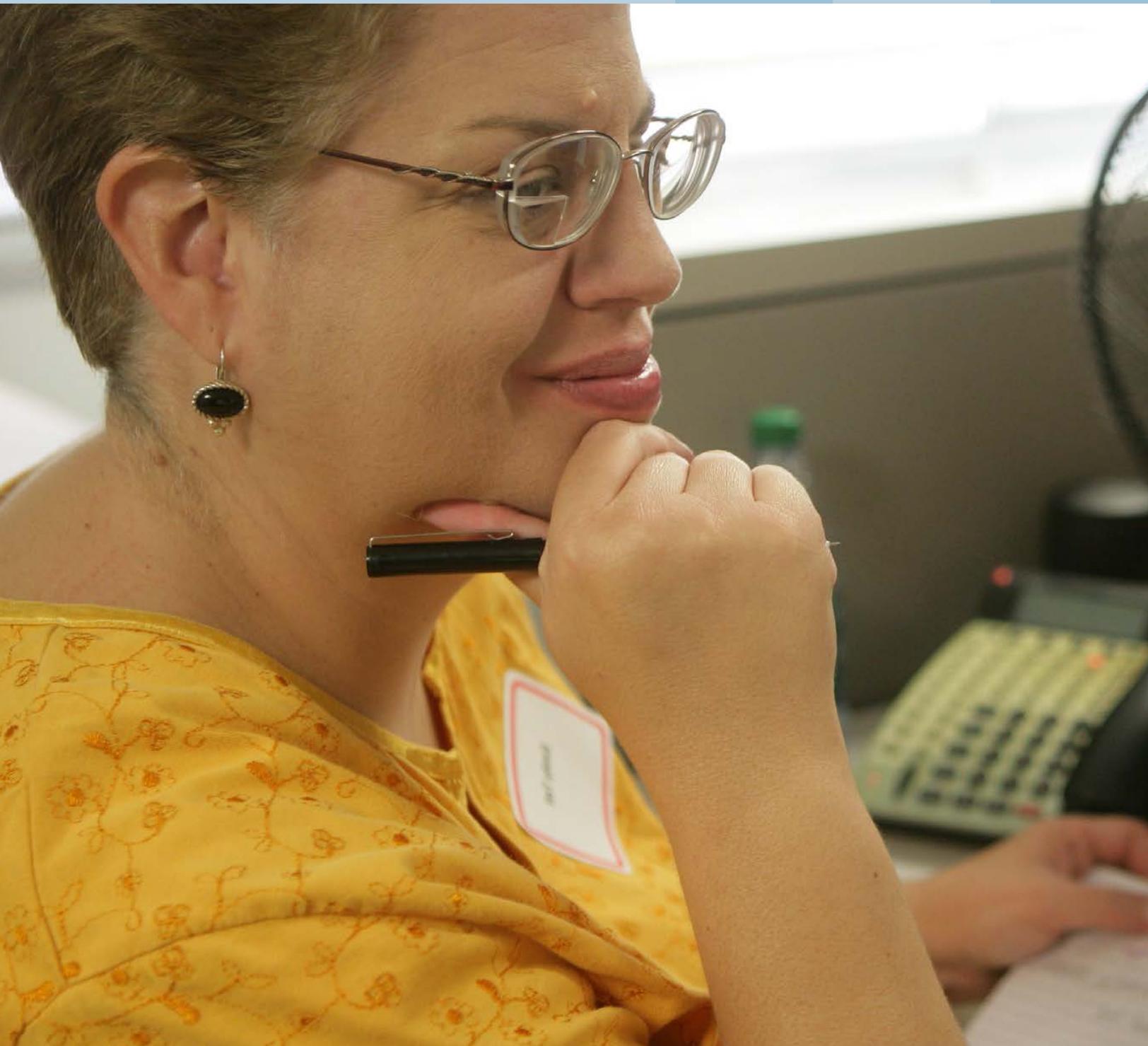


Special Edition: Employment



**VANDERBILT
KENNEDY CENTER**
for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities



tennesseeworks



The Arc
Tennessee

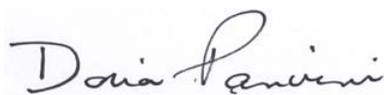
A Letter of Thanks

The stories in this collection were compiled by students enrolled in a Vanderbilt University course on families. This course provides an introduction to the field of family studies, with special attention paid to families that include children and adults with disabilities.

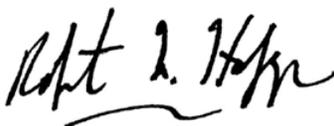
The course offers future educators, advocates, and researchers an opportunity to learn what it's like for a family to include a member with a disability. As part of the course, students conduct interviews and learn firsthand about encounters with education, health care, housing, employment, and disability services in Tennessee. This particular edition focuses on the topic of employment. The stories illustrate why employment matters in the lives of people with disabilities. They introduce people who want the opportunity to choose work that is meaningful for them, earn a paycheck, be as independent as possible, share and improve their skills, and make connections with others. And while access to competitive and integrated work opportunities greatly increases quality of life, the average unemployment rate for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities is 83%.

The Vanderbilt Kennedy Center and The Arc Tennessee thank all the families who shared their stories. By reading them, you will receive snapshots in time of a diverse group of individuals with disabilities, across a spectrum of age, disability, geographic location, socio-economic status, and race. These stories demonstrate the limits as well as the lack of supports and services in Tennessee for individuals with developmental disabilities and the impact this has on family life. By sharing these stories, the students and families hope to demonstrate the great importance of eliminating barriers to increase competitive integrated work opportunities for all persons with disabilities.

To view additional stories from Tennesseans with disabilities, please visit:
kc.vanderbilt.edu/kindredstories



Doria Panvini
Community Advisory Council
Vanderbilt Kennedy Center



Robert Hodapp, Ph.D.
Professor of Special Education
Director of Research
Vanderbilt Kennedy Center



Carrie Hobbs Guiden
Executive Director
The Arc Tennessee

The Arc Tennessee
www.thearctn.org

Vanderbilt Kennedy Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities
kc.vanderbilt.edu

Table of Contents

Stories

Tennessee Employment Data.....	page 4
Scott (age 45).....	page 5
William (age 30).....	page 6
Portia (age 34).....	page 9
Laurie (age 28).....	page 10
Maria (age 21).....	page 11
Chris (age 47).....	page 12
Cheryl (age 37).....	page 14
Rocco (age 36).....	page 16
Jim (age 60).....	page 18
Charlotte (age 37).....	page 19

Tennessee Employment Data

Table 1: Demographic Trends

	1999	2001	2003	2005	2007	2009	2011
State population (in thousands)	5,639	5,746	5,842	5,956	6,149	6,296	6,403
State unemployment rate	4.0%	4.4%	5.8%	5.6%	4.6%	10.5%	9.0%

Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics

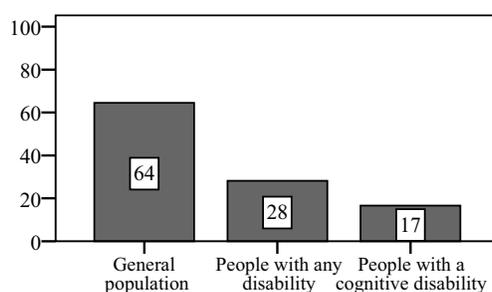
Table 2: Employment Participation for Working-Age People (Ages 16–64)*

	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011
Estimated working-age population	3,863,179	3,871,593	3,946,204	4,035,889	4,075,040	4,094,690	4,134,006
Number of people with any disability	627,757	636,482	627,938	520,145	534,741	531,224	554,412
Number of people with a cognitive disability	249,941	254,763	255,389	214,251	224,283	230,115	237,745
Number of people employed	2,621,286	2,646,286	2,725,460	2,808,852	2,663,414	2,623,420	2,665,677
Number of people with any disability who are employed	201,760	205,879	201,662	181,140	157,378	149,635	156,420
Number of people with a cognitive disability who are employed	53,563	56,935	57,644	49,863	40,607	40,476	39,454
Percentage of all people who are employed	67.9%	68.4%	69.1%	69.6%	65.4%	64.1%	64.5%
Percentage people with any disability who are employed	32.1%	32.3%	32.1%	34.8%	29.4%	28.2%	28.2%
Percentage people with a cognitive disability who are employed	21.4%	22.3%	22.6%	23.3%	18.1%	17.6%	16.6%

Source: American Community Survey (ACS)

*Due to changes implemented in the American Community Survey in 2008, data for people with disabilities for 2007 and earlier years should not be compared with data beginning in 2008.

Figure 1: Percentage of Working-Age Population Employed in 2011



Source: American Community Survey (ACS).



Scott (age 45)

attend board meetings too. I love multi-tasking, computers, and I get my assignments done.

I have done speaking engagements for 25 years for The Arc. I have presented to students in pre-school, junior high, and high school. I speak at parent associations and colleges around Tennessee. I speak about employment and about how to keep a job. I tell them about the "R" word, which is the bad word. I give a lot of talks about self-advocacy. I like talking to high school level age the most, especially the ones that are about to graduate. I talk about life after high school such as getting a car, maintaining a job, and postsecondary education.

In high school I had volunteer jobs. During my senior year, I had a car shop job. I was behind the desk. I was kind of a supervisor. I made sure the workers had the parts they needed to do their jobs. I did those as part of my high school curriculum before I graduated. I also worked at a hospital in Illinois-the same one I was born in- as a janitor. It was both volunteer and I got paid. High school did not really prepare me for life after graduation. I tried my best on the SAT test. When it came to those tests I just completely blanked out. I didn't get to go to college, but my sister did get to go.

When I first moved to Nashville, Tennessee I had to go through Vocational Rehabilitation to get a job. I got a job right away. I went through New Horizons and I worked for the Sheraton Hotel. It was a paying job. I worked at the Sheraton from 1987-1988. I kind of liked that job. I used to be a janitor and then they moved me to the linens. That was the best part of the job. I got to use the steam machine to fold the linens, which I liked. Eventually they referred me to The Arc Tennessee.

I have worked with The Arc for almost 26 years. I am the administrative assistant and the receptionist. My parents take me to work and bring me back at the end of the day. I live about 30 minutes away from work. I like all the staff here. I helped train all the staff, too. I work 40 hours a week. I answer phones and take messages. I am the gopher for the office. I run back and forth. I

My dream job is to become a high school teacher either in government, history, or social studies. I would like to teach young adults or all adults with disabilities. I would like to attend night school so I can continue my education. Since I have acquired these new abilities and skills from working here at The Arc maybe it will help me. But for now I guess I would have to go to night school first. I would also like to move out and get my own place. I am 45-years-old and I am still living with my parents in their house. I say to myself that it is time to move out. The only barrier that is keeping me from that is my parents. They fear for my safety. They want me to live with them, but they are both 90 years old. I am just going to take it one day at a time. Maybe some day I can make it after all.

What I see about employment out there is that it may be a rat race, but every person needs a chance to have a job. It is important to stick to it and keep pushing and pushing to find a job. If I never had a job, I would push hard to get a job. Having a job not only gives me money and health care, it gives me self-esteem. So, I'm going to stay where I am right now because I like it here. ■

William (age 30)

My son, William, was hit by a car when he was 4 years old, which resulted in a traumatic brain injury. Because of his brain injury his mind works different than it used to. For example, when it comes to computers, he cannot teach his mind to concentrate on one thing for a long period of time. He does like to play games and he does an excellent job being by himself when his dad and I have to be away at work. He washes his own clothes, and when phone calls come in he calls me at work to let me know. So he's good at taking care of himself. He also does good landscaping – he cuts the grass. He goes out with an older guy and they help people move stuff in their yard or cut grass. And he's good at janitorial stuff.

William is the second oldest of my four kids. I really try to keep him in good environment around good people. He is influenced a lot by the people he is around, so I try to keep him around people who are positive. He's a good man. He sings in the choir at church and he is just so filled with the spirit.

William has had two jobs. His first job was in high school at Life Action and his current job is at Pizza Hut. During high school the Vocational Rehabilitation program found him a job as a janitor for Life Action, which is a place for rehabilitation for people with disabilities. He was a janitor there for about 2 years, but the company went out of business so the position ended. He really liked that job and I think he did a good job there.

After the janitorial position ended, Vocational Rehabilitation found him a job at Pizza Hut. This was right after he graduated high school. He started out working four days per week, but eventually they cut his hours all the way down to one day a week. They keep cutting his hours and the supervisor says it's because they don't have any more hours at Pizza Hut, but I don't think that's the whole truth. He gets transportation to and from Pizza Hut that costs \$3 going and \$3 coming back. Since they cut his hours so bad he barely makes any money. His last paycheck was only \$15 for two weeks. His ride cost \$6, so that's only \$9 left over. He's been working there over five years, so I don't understand why this is happening.

I've been in contact with Voc Rehab to try to find him a better job, but they said he does not qualify and cannot get back into the program because he's been out for six years and already has an active job.

“My dream is for William to find something that he likes to do and to be happy.”

One of the main barriers for employment for my son is transportation because I work all day long. So, finding a job that's nearby

is challenging. He can't stand on his feet for a long period of time and that's another issue because the job he has now at Pizza Hut making boxes, he's on his feet for a long period of time and his legs start aching him and that is his disability. He can't stand for a long period of time and that's exactly what he's doing. He cannot stand for more than an hour or two or his legs start hurting him. Sometimes he'll come home from work and his legs are

“I want more for him. I’m not going to be here forever.”

swollen, so he’ll have to sit with heating pads on his legs all night.

For me as a mother, there’s only so much I can do. All I can do is just get him a heating pad and try to make him comfortable. So that’s a physical barrier, but there are other mental barriers too. He really likes to work. Even though there are all these barriers, they act like there is nothing else they can do; there is no other hope. They think it’s a dead end for him, and that’s depressing for him. But I believe there is always hope.

Employment makes a big difference in William’s life. More than anything, it makes a big difference in his self-esteem. He’s a grown man. He’s 30 years old, he doesn’t have a family of his own, and he can’t get around like other people because of his disability. He just wants to be like everybody else and go out and work every day. If Voc Rehab could find him a job he’d be happy. There’s just got to be something else, but they tell us there’s nothing else we can do. I want more for him. I’m not going to be here forever. He just needs a little something more than what he’s getting at Pizza Hut, where he’s making \$15 every two weeks. No one can survive on that.

My dream is for William to find something that he likes to do and to be happy for the rest of his life. He doesn’t mind working at Pizza Hut, but it’s not his dream job and he just can’t support himself on that money. He likes talking to people, especially older people, so working at a retirement home would be a great fit. We just need help finding that good fit. ■



Portia (age 34)

Rochelle Center also helped me get a job at Kroger. I went all the way through job training at a store near my house, but when they offered me a job it was in Cool Springs. I don't drive and that is too far away from my house. I think I would have liked working at Kroger, but I couldn't get there everyday.

I worked at Fazoli's as a dining room attendant for eight years. I was named employee of the month a lot and had many customers come in and ask for me by name. I still have my plaque. I enjoy working in the restaurant business and really loved that job. I had to quit because they had to cut my hours.

My name is Portia. I am 34 years old, and I have lived with my grandparents in Nashville, Tennessee for 30 years. I love sports. I'm really good at basketball, bowling, and golf. I especially love to watch the Tennessee Volunteers. I was the manager for many of the sports teams in high school and really loved my time there.

While I was in high school, I was very active at my church, where I helped with the nursery and other children's programs. However, I did not work a paying job in high school; I focused on my schoolwork. There weren't a lot of opportunities for me in high school to be involved in the community. Things have changed a lot since I was in high school.

Ever since I graduated from high school I have been working various jobs throughout the Nashville community. When I graduated from high school I started a paid position at Ingram Books. I got that job with help from the Rochelle Center. I shelved books, helped with records, and did other organizational tasks. I worked there for 3 years and loved that job. I stopped working there because they stopped being associated with the Rochelle Center.

After Fazoli's, I joined AmeriCorps. They helped me to work at Vanderbilt. I loved working at the Vanderbilt Kennedy Center, because they had a lot of people I loved there. I was an AmeriCorps member and could work for one year. I helped with files and stuffed bags for events. I would love to work at Vanderbilt again.

I have not had another job since Vanderbilt, and continue to volunteer at my church. I help with the daycare on Monday and Fridays. I enjoy this job, but it would be nice to be paid.

I worked with the state to try and find a job and they wanted me to go to the Tennessee Rehabilitation Center in Smyrna. But, many people that I knew who had gone there did not get a job. The state also helped me to work at IHOP, but I had to work on Sundays. I didn't like to miss church, so that wasn't a good fit for me.

My grandmother says I am very personable and I would love to have a job being around people. I am very organized and love computers. I think I have a lot of great skills to bring to a job. I have some friends that work at the Children's

“I like to set goals, and having another job is a goal that I have set for myself.”



Hospital and I think I would love to do that. The age limit for the program that they work with is too young for me.

One of the biggest problems I have is that I am too old for many of the programs to help people with disabilities get jobs. There are so many more opportunities for people in high school or right out of high school. Also, it's hard to find jobs that will work with my schedule. I

can work anytime during the week, but Sundays during church, and I have had trouble finding someone who will let me have that schedule.

I like to set goals, and having another job is a goal that I have set for myself. I think I would be happier if I had a job to look forward to going to everyday and people to work with at my job. ■



Laurie is 28 years old and has Down syndrome. She currently lives with her mother, Martine, in Memphis, Tennessee. Laurie is a very capable person full of personality.

After Laurie's graduation from high school, Martine began advocating on her daughter's behalf. She requested Laurie be allowed back in school to have access to further academics while she worked to secure a job. The school system was not agreeable and Martine had to hire an attorney to get Laurie back into the program. Since the law is that individuals with disabilities may be served in public schools until the year they turn 22, Laurie returned to high school. Eventually, she began a part-time job at Kroger with supports from Vocational Rehabilitation. This was her first job experience. She worked there until she finished her transition program. When she finished, she attended a postsecondary program in Smyrna, Tennessee.

While Laurie was in high school, Martine registered her with Vocational Rehabilitation services to help in her job search. After many struggles, Laurie was placed in a job at a movie theater and had the assistance of a job coach for about a week. After this she was on her own. Soon after, Martine began receiving phone calls that Laurie was moving too slowly. A meeting was arranged and Laurie was told she needed to work faster. She was also told she couldn't

Laurie (age 28)

talk to the other employees.

Laurie is very outgoing and had made a friend on the job. She was told she was no longer allowed to speak with her at work. After that, Laurie was largely ignored. To better understand the situation, Martine asked if she could shadow Laurie. The first thing she noticed when she was shadowing was that no one spoke to her daughter. Martine said that the other employees looked at them both like they were strangers. Eventually, Laurie was terminated for being "too slow" and for "showing attitude."

Martine mentioned to the Vocational Rehabilitation counselor that no one would want to go to work and not be allowed to talk or make friends. The counselor told Martine work is about work and not about talking and making friends, but Martine held that friendships are what make jobs like that worthwhile. She also held that the employer, job placement coach, parent, and the individual need to work together to make employment successful. This unity did not occur in the described experience. Since then, Laurie has been looking for another job.

Martine, like many parents, wants her daughter to hold a job and live as independently as possible. She wants Laurie to be happy in whatever job she holds.

Currently, transportation is the biggest barrier to finding Laurie a job. Memphis does not have convenient public transportation, so Laurie's independence, job search, and options are greatly affected.

However, Martine and Laurie are committed to working together to set up the best possible future. A happy and meaningful life that allows Laurie to be as independent as possible is the goal. ■



Maria (age 21)

Maria is 21 years old and has a business she started with the help of her parents and her job track instructors at the Star Center in Jackson, Tennessee. Maria has been working since her senior year of high school through a work study program for work-based learning.

The program placed her in jobs at a retirement home and at a hospital. At the retirement home, Maria helped with cleaning and food service tasks. At the hospital she labeled things in the basement, which she did not enjoy very much. At the retirement home she developed a love for visiting with and talking to the elderly patients, so following high school Maria secured a job at the same retirement center. After working at the retirement center for approximately four months, she entered a job training program at the Star Center.

At the Star Center, Maria entered a job training program and learned about how to dress and act at work. She also gained skills like typing and worked with an instructor to plan her job track with the input of her parents. Maria's parents wanted to collaborate with the Star Center to come up with a business that Maria could have that would utilize her

strengths of memorizing, connecting, and working with people. They came up with the idea of her becoming a storyteller. The Star Center arranged for a storyteller from Nashville to come to Jackson and run a workshop with Maria to learn the tools of the trade, and Maria became the Sunshine Storyteller.

As a storyteller, Maria is able to utilize her strengths. Maria has currently memorized about twenty Aesop's Fables, the story of the Nativity, and several other monologues. While she is telling stories, she also incorporates acting and singing into her performances. She also works as a spokesperson for the Star Center and delivers a short speech before her performances about how the Center has helped her.

In addition to storytelling, Maria works with the Star Center's Music and Art Therapy team. She assists the Center's therapists when they visit the Forest Cove Retirement Center and the Therapy and Learning Center.

Maria says she has always wanted to live in an apartment with a roommate and she thinks having a job will help her make that happen someday.

“Working makes a lot of difference.”

“Working makes a lot of difference,” said Maria. “I enjoy it. I like getting out of the house and it's better than sitting in my chair all the time here

at home. I want to become the best Sunshine Storyteller that I can be. Just because I have a disability does not mean that I have to stop chasing my dream of becoming the storyteller that I am. Don't give up. Don't back down. Don't lose faith in yourself. That's always been a good moral for me.” ■



Chris (age 47)

aggressive, which happens when he gets upset. Chris had a variety of experiences in sheltered workshops during his young adult life, and they were all similarly negative experiences. When the family was in the Washington D.C. area, Chris started doing volunteer work and all of his behavior problems went away. He stocked shelves at a CVS, which went really well until the manager changed. He then volunteered at the downtown public library initially boxing books to be sent to China and later had other tasks. When the family returned to Nashville, Tennessee Chris worked at Goodwill again. When that was no longer successful, he went to New Horizons, an agency that does have a large sheltered workshop, but Chris was involved with an enclave that goes out and works in the community. Chris's current job at TDOT was found through New Horizons and he really enjoys going to work there.

"Chris has always really liked to have real work," said his mother Doria. "While he could never say 'I like to work,' with his words, he can sign it and he just shows it behaviorally."

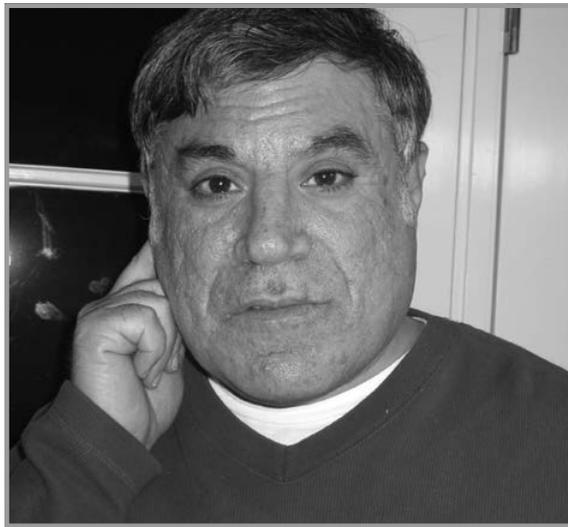
Chris has always enjoyed working as long as it is out in the community rather than in a sheltered workshop. Chris currently works at the Tennessee Department of Transportation (TDOT) washing cars. He is a very loving and caring 47-year-old man with a diagnosis of intellectual disability. Chris is using more words now than in the past, but he also uses a lot of gestures when interacting with others. He does have challenges with hearing, but he is able to communicate his wants and needs very effectively. Chris loves traveling and he also likes to people watch. He is very aware of how people feel about him and is extremely sensitive to relationships.

Doria shared that Chris originally started working in a sheltered workshops when he finished high school at age 22. There was a program at Goodwill for people with intellectual disabilities that took place during the summers. Chris did not enjoy the environment. He became increasingly

Chris has Medicaid waiver services so he has both residential supports through Mid-TN Supported Living as well as day supports through New Horizons. He lives separately from his mother and has a live-in companion, Sarah, who is with Chris at all times, except when he is at work and on weekends.

Chris works Tuesdays through Fridays with two other men from New Horizons. They arrive at New Horizons and then take a van to TDOT to wash and vacuum out the cars. Chris has one-on-one support and there is another person who helps the other two men. Mondays are community-based days where they do activities like going to movies or going out to eat. Chris really likes his routine. Doria explained that he has a strong sense of timing, which includes when he is supposed to work. He knows when the weekend is and when it's time to go back to work. "He knows that if he comes over for Christmas Eve, he'll stay overnight for two

“Chris has always enjoyed working as long as it is out in the community rather than in a sheltered workshop.”



nights but the day after Christmas, he’s ready to go to work.”

When asked about any barriers that have come up during Chris’s experiences, Doria replied, “Yes, there are frequently challenges. Chris needs the one-on-one support and sometimes you can go along very smoothly for a while, but then something like staff turnover will take place. If the new staff members are not well-trained and don’t know Chris well, there can be some real problems in how they support him and communicate with him.”

She has a very clear vision in terms of her dreams for Chris’s future. She said, “Well I would like for him to continue to have a meaningful job.” A

job that’s meaningful to him is critical.” She continued that Chris has a very strong sense of himself when working and she wants that to always be available to him. He is happier when he is out working in the community.

“I think what makes a huge difference is how he feels about himself. He feels really good about himself when things are going well. He’s happy. It’s interesting that he has felt like working in the community is meaningful. Nobody ever explained that to him. You can’t give him a lecture about how work affects self-worth, but he lives it. He can understand it, wants to do it, and feels good about himself. That permeates his life and ours.” ■

Cheryl (age 37)

My name is Cheryl and I am 37 years old. I have cerebral palsy. It has not been easy for me to get a job, but for the past 16 years I have continued to pursue employment. I believe employment would allow me to experience what it means to be self-sufficient, that is, to provide for myself, like what everyone else is doing. Life might be easier if I just depended on my family or the government for welfare, but that is not living, it is only existing. I want to live, not merely exist. My employment journey has been challenging but this is what I believe: NEVER GIVE UP HOPE.

I grew up in Crossville, Tennessee. I did not have any work experiences or any job-related training when I was in high school because my physical health did not allow me to do so. My energy was limited and hence I used them on my studies. But I was not a bookworm. I participated in extra curricular activities like everyone else too. I was involved in my school's basketball team.

My first work experience came after my high school graduation in 1995. I volunteered at a sheltered workshop for one and a half years. I did clerical work like answering phone calls, filing, and copying. The sheltered workshop also provided me an opportunity to volunteer in a hospital, once in a week, where I did similar clerical work. I thought I would get a paid job through that volunteer position, but it did not happen. Subsequently, I stopped volunteering there and started volunteering at a shelter for the homeless. The job scope was similar to what I did at the sheltered workshop. I worked 4-5 days a week, but I still failed to be hired. I felt really frustrated with the whole experience because despite going through lots of training, it did not secure me a job. So I quit volunteering and applied for a community college instead.

My breakthrough came in 2001 when I attended a meeting of a grant with The Arc Tennessee. The assistant director of The Arc took me around in Crossville to look for jobs that led me to be hired for a grant work with The Arc. As a result, I moved from Crossville to Nashville. I have been a paid staff with The Arc for almost 9 years.

In 2006, I found another job via the internet with AT&T. I conduct telephone surveys as part of their market strategy. Again, I have to thank the assistant director of The Arc, who assisted me through the interview process. Both are part-time jobs as my energy level, due to my disability, does not permit me to hold a full-time job. I am really thankful for these two jobs, but sometimes I do wish to do something different, especially after doing the same kind of work (i.e., telemarketing) for almost 12 years.

Getting a job is difficult, but maintaining it could be even more challenging. Transportation is the number one challenge. I have slower reaction time and weaker eyesight than typical people, so I depend on public transportation like the bus and cab. I depend on Access Ride, which is a special service for persons with disabilities through the MTA (Metro Transit Authority). However, the driver will not wait for you if you are more than 5 minutes late from the scheduled pick-up time. That is a problem for me sometimes. As a result, I usually end up having to take a cab and sometimes I spend as much as I earn at work on cab fares alone. I do have wonderful workmates who give me a ride to work or to home when they can.

The next challenge is the public's perception of disability. Many employers do not understand that we can work well if we have accommodations provided at the workplace. For example, I cannot write very well and therefore I need to use a computer or get someone to write

“Being employed gives me a sense of self-respect, because I am finally paying something for myself, instead of depending on my family or the government.”



for me. In some cases these perceptions lead to discrimination, especially when I go for job interviews. People see only our limitations and not our strengths. It is hard to overcome public perceptions.

Being employed gives me a sense of self-respect, because I am finally paying something for myself, instead of depending on my family or the government. This sense of self-respect is especially precious to someone like me, who has been living like an outcast for many years due to my disability. It is transforming too

because I see a future now. My fiancé and I plan to get married and have a family of our own. With these future plans in mind, I hope to get another part-time job so that we could finance a better apartment after our marriage.

My advice to others who are seeking employment: build a network of friends. More networking and friendship would better your chance for employment. It took me 10 years to be where I am today and I am here to stay. And this is living, not just existing. ■

Rocco (age 36)

Every day, I greet throngs of Publix customers who come through the cashier's line. As an employee, I try to embody every aspect of the Publix slogan: "where shopping is a pleasure." Working here is an immense pleasure, too. My job description officially includes putting products in bags and helping customers bring them out to their cars, but I like to think it also includes bringing my personality to the store and sharing it with others. Some people recognize me instantly by my orange Tennessee Volunteers lanyard and always want to strike up a conversation about the latest game.

I have been employed with Publix since February 2012. I think this is a much better match for me than any other job I've had because it allows me to perform at the optimum of my talents. For the first time in my life, I feel supported by my co-workers and customers. I'm an integral member of a team where everyone is trying to row the boat in one direction. No one is trying to drill a hole in the boat to sabotage the journey for everyone else.

The journey to meaningful employment was not an easy one, often filled with holes in the boat determined to sink me. But I've learned that if you want to strike gold, you have to keep digging until you get it right. To really understand why, it's important that you understand all the digging attempts that preceded it.

I come from humble beginnings. Born in 1977 in the rural town of Springfield, Massachusetts, I spent most of my early years on a farm. I quickly learned manual chores like harvesting vegetables, chopping firewood, and tending to goats. When I was in high school, my father told me those famous words that every father says to his son at one point in his life, "Get a

haircut and get a real job." I followed orders and found my first "real" job as a fruit plucker at an apple orchard in the tiny, "Mayberry-type" town of Munson, Massachusetts.

High school was a dark time for me. As a student with Asperger's syndrome, I wasn't your "All-American kid." I didn't have many friends and often felt like a hermit. People thought I was a misfit even though I didn't feel like I was. I took a tongue lashing for my differences and felt like people were stereotyping and profiling me.

I tried to focus on other things while in high school, such as my love for cooking. I decided I wanted to be the next Emeril Lagasse and went to culinary school for one semester. Shortly after, my family and I moved to Florida, where I was told I would have to repeat my junior year. I didn't see how I could possibly endure another grueling year of high school, so I ultimately decided to drop out and cram for the GED.

"Employment gives me a purpose."

While this was a painful decision, it impacted me in many ways. Pain is how you develop and evolve as a person, like the blisters earned from hours of playing the banjo. I learned the importance of pain as

a growth mechanism at one of my earlier jobs at McDonald's in Largo, Florida. During the six months I was employed there, the manager reprimanded me very often. There was one time when I somehow got nominated to scrub the inside of the fry vat, and I accidentally left the valve open just enough for all the grease to spill. When my manager discovered this mistake, he was livid. You would have thought I had committed triple homicide.

There are many jobs where you have to

“This isn’t just a job to me. A job is something you do from 9-5 and don’t see any value in it except a paycheck. This is a vocation, something I use to rate how content I feel.”

be thick-skinned in order to succeed. I was dismissed from Dillard’s after only a couple of weeks because I wasn’t “ruthless” enough. But I never let that stop me from finding the right position for me.

I became interested in Publix when my parents worked at the stores in Florida. I felt strongly about wanting to work there because of the company’s philanthropic core and active involvement in various charities. Unlike other corporations, Publix seems to put people before profit, as evidenced in the way it treats its employees and customers.

I applied on the computer for Publix initially and followed up until those “no’s” transformed into a “yes.” Now I’m working 12-15 hours weekly as a bagger, supported by Gary Schmitt of New Horizons, who attends each shift with me and helps me stay focused on the daily tasks. I feel very content in this role. Employment gives me a purpose, and Publix made that possible.

My life has been impacted greatly by those who helped me along the way, so I want to pay it forward. This isn’t just a job to me, because a job is something you do from 9-5 and don’t see any value in it except a paycheck. This is a

vocation, something I use to rate how content I feel. My greatest advocacy is my vocation, and I want to set an example by being the example for others. ■



Jim (age 60)

far enough on the phone interview, so I told them I am in a wheelchair. Shortly afterwards they call to say they had filled the position internally. Interestingly enough, the exact same job was posted again about a month later. The same job now required you to be able to stand for long hours and lift 50 pounds. It was so obvious what they had done, not because I wasn't qualified, but because I was in a wheelchair."

Jim was involved in an airplane accident, which left him with severe spinal damage. He had multiple surgeries and went through years of rehabilitation. He now uses a wheelchair to move about.

Jim is a process engineer. He worked in the nonwoven (textiles) industry for many years. At the time of the plane crash, he was between jobs. After a sufficient focus on his recovery, he resumed his job search and was successfully hired part-time as a contract engineer. This eventually led to a full-time position as a quality engineer. In March 2013 he was informed management had doubts he could perform his job. In May, Jim left the company. However, he has been looking for another job since March 2013.

"The reality is I'm over 50 and I use a wheelchair," said Jim. "Both are pretty large barriers to getting my foot in the door. Most interviews go very well when they're looking at qualifications on a resume and asking technical questions, but then I tell them that I use a wheelchair and they tend to lose interest. I tell them because I don't want to surprise them at an interview, but my experience is once they find out, they lose interest.

One company seemed very excited and very interested and it looked like we'd progressed

At another company he interviewed with, the building was five stories and they had an elevator designated only for freight. It wasn't rated for passenger transport. "I went down and interviewed and the head of their engineering group didn't have any problem with me using a chair. However, the problem was they couldn't get me to all the different floors. The ADA requires reasonable accommodations. They're not going to put in a personal elevator for one person. I don't have any bad feelings about it, but I would have liked to have had that job.

Having a job is important. To me, it's huge. Steady income would allow me to go out and enjoy things, and also I want to get a standing chair. Standing chairs are better for your health with a spinal cord injury. But, I just can't afford that until I have a job. Plus, I have supplies and medications I have to purchase. I need to work. When you're working, you have self-worth. You feel better about yourself, because you are productive and engaged in society. The reality though, is I have serious doubts that I will be able to find something." ■



Charlotte (age 37)

My daughter Charlotte is 37 years old and has Down syndrome. She works in a retirement home, and lives with us at home. She attends a Sunday school class. She went to public school and can read, though her math skills are very low. She was in a regular class the first four years of public school, and they mainstreamed her. She had an attendant with her for the first three years. After that, they had her in a special education class, going out for some of the regular activities like physical education, music, and art. She stayed in school until she was 22.

At Charlotte's high school she was in a program that placed her in work sites for about six weeks for an hour or two at a time. She worked at several places—a bookstore, the cafeteria at school, a daycare center, and a few other places. It was really good training. There should be some type of transition program at all schools, because it's really hard once they leave high school.

Her first year out of high school, Charlotte volunteered at a public school that served four-year-old children with special needs. She volunteered the full school day. She helped the kids with things like staying in line or washing their hands. She also read to them. It was great, but they did not pay her for it. She was a volunteer. Toward the end of the school year I asked if they could hire Charlotte, but

because she had a special education diploma, it wasn't possible.

So at the end of that school year in May, there was an opening at a developmental center. It's a day program. Also, Vocational Rehabilitation was able to find Charlotte a job. So, we had choices. She could go to the day program, continue volunteering at this school with no benefits or pay, or try this new job, which would be part-time at a retirement center. We had about a week to make that decision. We chose the new job working part-time in the dining room at an assisted living/retirement center. Vocational Rehabilitation provided an aide through the STAR Center for a little while to help her get used to the job.

She's been working there 14 years and works 20 hours a week. She loves it. She loves to give hugs, but she's learned how she can give a hug but then needs to get back to work! And of course, people pass away who she has worked with, and she has had to deal with that. She's also had to learn how to work with people who don't know anything about disabilities, people who maybe don't want to be her friend, and people who would do anything they could to help her. Working at this job has been a good thing for Charlotte. She has been there longer than a lot of her supervisors.

Through employment, my daughter has developed more independence. Also, some of the things that they've taught her to do there at work, she'll now do at home. I can see a difference between her and her friends who are not employed. I'm definitely glad we took this road.

For the future, I hope Charlotte can stay on at the center. She is doing well. I think it would be very difficult for her to find another job. ■

***“Having a job not only gives me money
and health care, it gives me self-esteem.”***

~Scott, The Arc Tennessee

Vanderbilt Kennedy Center for Excellence
in Developmental Disabilities
kc.vanderbilt.edu

The Arc Tennessee
www.thearctn.org

TennesseeWorks
www.tennesseeworks.org

Tennessee Kindred Stories of Disability
kc.vanderbilt.edu/kindredstories/