

RI WINS (Workforce Investment & New Solutions) is the name utilized by the RI Cross Disability Coalition for our DD Transformation Grant in collaboration with the RI Developmental Disabilities Council (RIDDC) and Skills for RI's Future. This newsletter provides information on the status of implementation of the goal areas within the project and efforts to educate and provide support to people with disabilities, staff from community agencies, and RI employers on creating sustainable change for meaningful and inclusive lives for individuals with disabilities.



### *Norm Marsh - Empowered, Empowering*

His story is one of transformation. His life and continuing stories are transformative for others.

Norm Marsh represents the goals of the Transformation Grant on so many levels. He's a graduate of the RI Developmental Disabilities Council's (RIDDC's) Business Series, he developed his photography business, "OUTTA THE NORM," and he continues to participate in the RIDDC's weekly networking meetings. He currently works part time as a Direct Support Professional (DSP) at the Out Of The Box art gallery, which is an extension of the Looking Upward DD agency that provides programs for others with disabilities, where he also provides photography. He also supports the journey of another entrepreneur who is currently a participant in the RIDDC Business Series.

And he makes an impact on his customers by making them smile in their portraits, transforming their sense of self, whether there is a disability or not.

A cell phone photo prompted a remarkable response; the

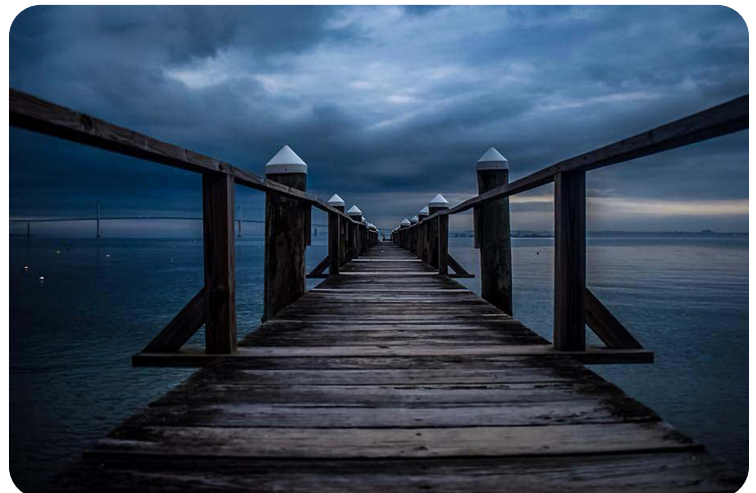
gift of a DSLR digital camera and a recommendation to take some formal photography classes, which ultimately kickstarted his business. Legally blind and unsteady on his feet, he was unsure of his prospects for success as a photographer. However, his initial interest in landscape photography eventually evolved to include portraits - although he nixed the idea of weddings after trying that specialty.

Norm's attitude also evolved from uncertainty to strong, re-assuring affirmation directed to others. With conviction he says about the people's pictures, "I see smiles on peoples' faces, no pun intended. It may take a half hour or an hour. People look genuinely happy in these photos."

He originally started taking photos for free, volunteering at first, but he's now getting paid and turning his photography hobby into a full-fledged business. "Maybe I can make this work. Everyone is a beautiful person," Norm proclaimed. No wonder Norm knows how to make people happy.

The full circle of transformation began with him and encircled others. Perhaps not everyone is as aware of transformation in their lives as Norm is. "Ever since I picked up that cell phone to take that shot...I can help someone forget about their bad day."

He had help along the way as well, in the form of customers testimonials and uplifting comments on social media. Employer Looking Upward saw talent and personal skills; they wanted to showcase his work and hire him to help others plus enlist photography skills. Aware of the conflict



*Walk of Life - Norm Marsh*

of interest that could arise from exhibiting his work at his place of employment, he opted to bypass the exhibition and take the job offer as a DSP, as well as shoot for them.

Casey Weibust, Of Looking Upwards, responded to his concern about some jobs that he just couldn't do. A simple "yes, you can," followed by "we'd love for you to be on our team" said it all. He's been working there since September.

Adding to his confidence was increased business acumen. Business help came his way once he made a connection with RIDDC's Self Employment Project director, Sue Babin. Hoping to get his business off the ground, he is passionate about his work, and "Sees true beauty in everyone." Sue and the Business Series team of instructors and peer mentors provided information and support – the groundwork needed for business viability. For him, that meant focusing his target market and understanding business finances, and both issues have been managed.

Norm may see the world through a wider lens now, with as much focus and increased opportunity as confidence. At the same time, he good-naturedly relates to his clients, "forget the world, how you (think) you're supposed to look. You are beautiful, no matter what." He may not call his work transformational, but some of us just might.

### ***Candidates Are Placed Across The State, From Roger Williams Park Zoo To Ocean State Job Lot***

Planning for after high school presents young people with many questions and opportunities. Figuring out what's next can be daunting. A conversation with Loraine Lesniak, CESP/ACRE, Supported Employment Specialist at West Bay Collaborative, and Christine (Chrissy) Doval, who serves as their Vocational Services Coordinator, offered insights into the paths of exploration and adventure for their job seekers. Their program paves the way that connects students with jobs while linking them to the wider communities in which they live. At the same time, the process solves workforce issues for employers as varied as Ocean State Job Lot and Roger Williams Park Zoo.

With extensive experience as a vocational specialist herself, Loraine refers to a familiar concept of teaching vocational skills in an after-school classroom program, followed by 100 hours of internships in what is called TRI -Employment, which was created at West Bay Collaborative through the RI Office of Rehabilitation Services.



Recalling other restaurants, retail stores, and markets across the state, from Dave's to Burlington Coat Factory, she recognizes the need for boxes to be unpacked and food service items prepped and knows how to help.

According to Chrissy, there are quite a few business referrals, and Loraine is an "excellent job site developer." They routinely conduct vocational interviews to understand what their young adult applicants want to learn about, then interest testing to ensure an appropriate match. As important as it is to help the applicants explore what they're interested in, it's also important to help them realize that what they're imagining something to be like may not be the case. "Sometimes this is just as valuable an experience for them as they see what they might want to do for the rest of their lives." One example that Loraine offers is the result of her connection with the East Greenwich Animal Protection League. It's not uncommon for applicants to be interested in working with animals only to learn that it's less about petting kittens and puppies and more focused on feeding large dogs and cleaning cages.

The young candidates getting ready for employment typically range from 16 to 22. Equally quickly, she mentions nine kids were part of the Roger Williams Park connection through Summer Work programs or TRI Employment. Four hires have been there for almost two years.

Tuning to individuals' interests and needs parallels her assessing a business's needs. It's not so much a sixth sense as a deep level of experience in working with young adults and walking the floors of a company once she gets in the door. However, getting in isn't easy, and she gets turned down at many stores.

"I use LinkedIn quite a bit to find out who HR directors are. And that's how I found out who it was the head of HR for Ocean State Job Lot. And I sent emails and sought them out until I finally got an answer. It took a while to get that relationship started," she says of a recent placement at the beloved Rhode Island-based retail chain. "Once I found the right person in the right niche, it took four or five months before I got that niche. And we had to sign a contract with them. We had to supply a reinsurance waiver with them. There was a lot of paperwork before we started to be able to go into the distribution center and the stores."

Ultimately, Loraine took two groups of job seekers for a distribution center tour and showed them where all the products from Ocean State Job Lot comes from. "It's a 1.2 million square foot building at Quonset Point," she explains. "They were so fascinated by the conveyor belts and robots that pick up boxes. It was a really cool place to visit. And it was fascinating for the kids to find out where everything comes from."



The impact of the program and her efforts are understandably a source of pride. Loraine described a young man who went through Cranston Transition Academy and Project Search at BCBH and was referred to her for job development and placement. She helped him with his resume and interviewing skills while in school. "He was excelling...he matured incredibly," also referring to his soft skills.

He attended a job fair at the Roger Williams Park Zoo, where there was an opportunity for food service. He landed the job, and within a couple of months, he was helping to cook up food for the zoo's many thousands of visitors. Next, he was hired to clean the patio and continued excelling. He was shy early on but became talkative and outgoing and was then able to join their Compass program, a self-directed supports program at West Bay. "I've seen him grow over three years and watching him excel is amazing." Two and a half years later, he is still employed at the Zoo but has been temporarily laid off because of the weather. He plans to return in early spring and work about 20 to 25 hours a week.

"I do find niches for people," she mentions reflectively. "In the past, I've had people employed six or seven years in different places and still there. It's fun to watch them grow and mature."

Considering the transformation grant over time, Loraine comments, "People are definitely more a part of the community. Employers are much more apt to hire people with disabilities now than ten years ago, or even five years ago."

Finding qualified workers remains a problem for everyone, but a good job match - plus support when needed - makes a difference, saving internships and jobs along the way.

### *A Family's Journey: Empowering A Child With Autism Through Education And Employment*

Every mom is in tune with her child and their needs, meeting every typical challenge and the complications that accompany a child with an intellectual or developmental disability. When Karyn C. realized that her son, Jack, might have some additional needs, she and her husband found themselves at a loss. Without resources and guidance they had to navigate the medical and educational systems on their own to get their son the diagnoses and supports he needed to thrive.

At that time, the family had to navigate a school system ill-equipped to provide a safe learning environment for a child diagnosed with autism; they learned on their own how to manage the typical or atypical behavior of their bright child.

The family focused on what would work for Jack, at school, at play, at work, and what his future might be, just as any family would. They also thought - and taught - that

the sky was the limit for him And, why not? Turns out, that support made a big difference, even if making that difference wasn't always easy.

- Find the right school that celebrated Jack's accomplishments, rather than his misunderstood behavior issues as a child? Check.
- Get the right diagnosis of his early childhood behavior? Eventually, check.
- Encourage his progress? Check.
- Encourage and teach a strong work ethic? Check.
- Support his personal and academic growth and challenges? Check.
- Manage whatever obstacles came their way as a family? Check.

The family carefully watched every phase of Jack's growth and progress, navigating most issues without the support of a specific school program. Karyn also knew her son would need to learn to cope with his unique way of doing things that others might not understand. She explained how the world might perceive his actions when she could; other times, she just knew to hug him. While comforting and consoling, she also took him to work at her home furnishing store, as well as making carpet sprinkles, teaching him the retail business, and how to make candles when he was old enough to safely handle that production. With Jack's family having an entrepreneurial background, his potential for entrepreneurial success just might have been baked in.

At the time Jack was in school, Karyn notes, "we didn't fully understand autism when we received that diagnosis. We treated Jack as though he didn't have a disability, but we were sensitive to it." Speaking of her family only, as she's aware that others' experiences vary, she informed Jack, "If you succeed it's because you do it, not because you have any special circumstances surrounding you. You are responsible for your actions."

That said, Karyn recalls Jack's grappling with the public classroom's chaos. Overstimulation is often difficult for kids on the spectrum. She admits that at that time accommodations weren't available, and conforming to the school's expected behaviors was difficult for Jack and the family. While more data, and Individualized Education Plans (IEP) are available now, at the time the family had to find their own solutions.

"Employment saved him. It offered him the opportunity to show people he's just like you and me," Karyn notes. He

worked at many Farmers' Markets and, in the store, until they sold it in 2019, and began selling online. When COVID hit, Karyn learned about the RIDDC's Self-employment project, which included online business classes.

"He learned the importance of how to present the business and how to handle finances. He learned the basics - we both did," comments this resourceful and supportive mother.

Apparently, he learned more than the basics from those eight classes.

"That self-employment program was the best thing I could have done for him," she said thoughtfully. "He saw people from other walks of life who were starting businesses. It gave him confidence and responsibility. He answered questions, delivered Mr. C's Old Thyme Scents elevator pitch. It's amazing how much he bloomed during that time."



Growing up in the same environment as his mom, Jack had a solid work ethic, plus a familiar routine of creating at home and selling outside. It was a logical progression to start a similar opportunity for Jack, while it also provided a safe and nurturing environment for him to grow. The result: he flourished.

He finished the RIDDC Business Development classes in 2020. This spring, he's finishing classes at CCRI's Lincoln campus to become a lab technician and has received a full-time job offer during his rotation of internships, prior to graduation.

While Karyn shares the story for this article, Jack also

shares the story, on many occasions, in many scenarios. Across the state, he is involved with the RI Cross Disability Coalition's Speakers Bureau and speaks to high school students with disabilities who are transitioning out of school and are unsure about what awaits them. He knows about self-employment - the RIDDC classes and the business realities. He talks about his business while he sells at weekend marketplaces and special events. Once reticent, he is now also willing to discuss being on the autism spectrum, agreeing to include in the business's branding, realizing he can help other families. Wanting to help others is yet another positive outcome for him.

"People see him and respect him," Karyn reports. She acknowledges that the way they raised him may not work for everyone, and that she certainly "cut him some slack." Wanting her child to be safe, secure, happy, and prospering, she also admits to being scared at times.

With entrepreneurship and business skills, as well as a lab technician degree, improved communication and coping skills, well-deserved confidence and independence, Jack has choices. Now at only twenty-two, Jack has launched. His future looks bright. The future looks brighter, too, for those with whom they have spoken, offering honesty and hope.

*Rachel Rasnick*  
***Proactive Parents, A Positive Approach, A Successful Daughter With Autism***

Rachel, as a child with autism, has had early intervention and an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) since she was three. Knowing that a traditional path of scholastic aptitude tests and college applications were not meant for Rachel, her parents - Karen and Martin - nevertheless paved the way to a clear and successful path for their bright, artistic, and athletic child by helping her find and strengthen everything that is positive.

Initially her grade school wasn't specialized enough for her, and the plan was to place her into a self-contained classroom. To do this meant a trek across the city and a day spent away from friends. Rachel's mom was a teacher and acutely aware that the proposed area was not a safe and healthy neighborhood for her daughter. The family moved to another town, enrolling her in a new school in the fourth grade, along with her siblings.

Rachel's athletic prowess began in grade school. Her fourth-grade gym teacher introduced the family to a peer group as well as to the Special Olympics team, where she

volunteered. Karen credits this to saving their lives, finding other happy and supportive parents with whom they could connect at the same time their daughter began to hit her stride.



In the fifth grade she was expelled from school until she "received the help she needed," and she was enrolled at Bradley. After six months she transitioned into middle school, where things changed. According to her mom, Karen, "she was much more controlled, got involved with activities, and she went on to high school."

Running and swimming during her school years and until after 12th grade, Rachel was a champion in and for the Special Olympics, where she has continued for more than twenty years - now as an ambassador as well as an athlete. Through swimming, track and field, bowling, and basketball, she remains active, involved, and happy with her teammates and coaches.

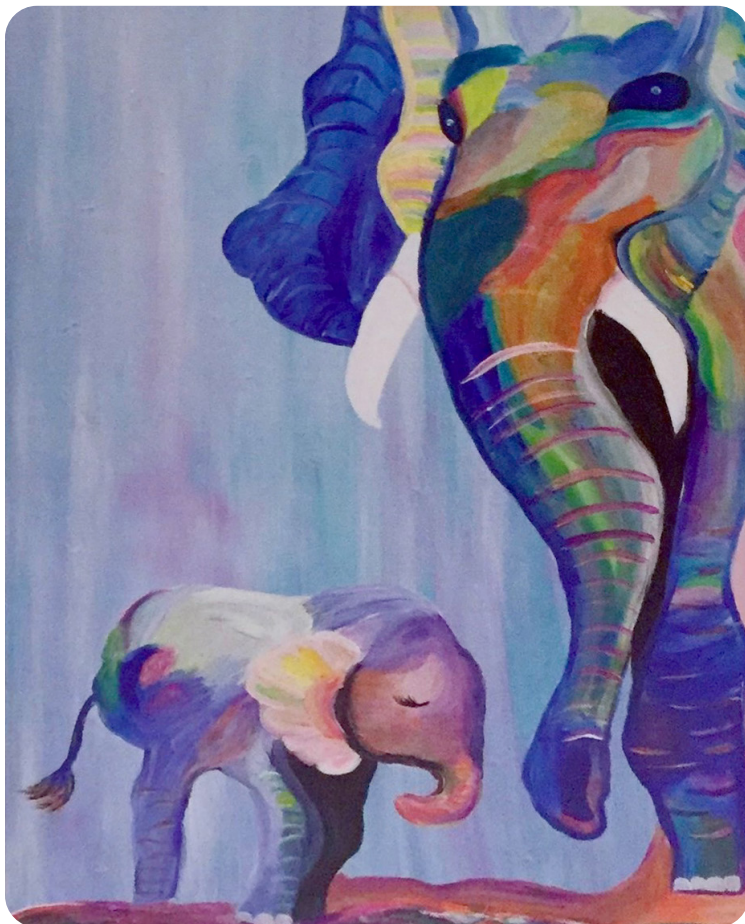
Rachel's parents learned she could stay in school until she was twenty-one. Karen presented it to Rachel as "your super senior year, and the second year, I called it your super-duper senior year because all of her friends were moving on."

She admits to being "really proactive in high school because she had the siblings on either side of her who were honor society," managing Rachel's IEP meetings with tact and wisdom by enlisting everyone to make sure that her daughter had a positive experience. In her words, making it right so that Rachel would "love school

... because we worked way too hard to get her to a place where she's happy and proud of herself." That advocacy worked.

Rachel's transition years from high school meant job training and exploring various vocational opportunities ranging from dog grooming and stocking drugstore shelves - which she didn't like - to working with children, which she did love, even if becoming a nursery school teacher was not an option. Looking Upwards, a five-day per week adult day program with an art studio was part of the transition, one which led to Rachel's chance encounter with a paint brush.

At twenty-two, Rachel's first creation signaled a call that became life changing. Karen laughs a bit as she recalls the comment, "She has some talent." The program hired an art teacher, and the family just started turning her artwork into note cards, selling them at the studio and the shop. Two years later, Rachel was tapped to join the RIDDC's entrepreneurship program, which included an eight-class Business Development Series to learn about the steps to grow a business.



Rallying for their daughter, Marty, who has business acumen, attended the class with Rachel. Karen admits that the classes were "way over Rachel's head at the time, but meeting peers at that time was the best thing for her." She made lasting friendships within that class and others, she eventually learned how to make an elevator pitch, and it has stayed with her." Years later, the family refers to the lessons within the binder, relying on the financial forms to this day for Rachel's now-flourishing, multi-faceted business.

This understandably proud mom lists the numerous projects underway. Rachel has been asked to teach art classes, she's involved with LifeWorks Inc., in Massachusetts, where she teaches a painting class every season. She was asked to do an art project with a kindergarten group for a Girl Scout badge. One of her designs is printed on fabric that was sewn into a dress. The list continues: jewelry, pottery, weaving, and designing dresses. Karen calls Rachel a Superstar!

Balancing the stellar trajectory, Karen also mentions other realities. Rachel has obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD). This means she needs guidance to produce work within a reasonable period of time rather than undo or erase her work in search of elusive perfection. Mom's encouraging words work in tandem with a firm but gentle guiding hand, "Rachel, you do have to work - doing something - just as everyone does." At the same time, Karen says, "the sky is the limit for all their kids." It's an earnest challenge meant to inspire all three kids, rather than submit to the - obviously incorrect - low ceiling a doctor once posed on Rachel at five years old.

She's clearly accomplished more than was expected of her on so many levels: a standing ovation at her bat mitzvah at thirteen. A fast return onto the horse that threw her. A trip to the National Special Olympics. A black belt in karate. Speaking about her business at national webinars.

Growth continues, personally and professionally, along with ongoing support from the family. With Rachel's work spanning the globe from the U.S. to the U.K., Mom will retire and help manage the business's growth, while Rachel's sister will help with her website and social media.

Still shy and rather quiet, Rachel is now a confident woman, partly as a result of her involvement in the RIDDC's Business Series and is continuing to work on her business and to develop her gifts. According to Karen, "The RIDDC's weekly networking meetings strengthen

her ability to promote her business using social media and keep her connected to friends and other successful business owners with disabilities, all who happily encourage her work and support her as an artist, an athlete and a friend.”

Every story is unique. Backgrounds differ. Themes recur. There is more than one path to finding a successful career and a happy life – with or without disabilities. Supportive people - family, friends, teachers, mentors, coaches, peers, programs and projects, make an important difference.



### *Vision Of Success, A Family Captures The Best Moments From School To Work*

Bryan began school at The Collaborative, a school in northern Rhode Island school for children ages 3-21 disabilities. At the time, it served children who weren't in a typical classroom setting. A special education director designed a program in the elementary school district where Bryan's family belonged, which was an improvement over the existing options that were a few towns away. At four years old he rejoined the school his sister attended, in a classroom with special needs children paired with others as role models.

Bryan's mother, Sue, remembers that he was well-adjusted and happy during early years, but the middle school years were more difficult, and not just by virtue

of those being inherently awkward. Less prepared teachers made the experience for him and his family more challenging. That, coupled with a diagnosis of dystonia, a movement disorder requiring medication that made him drowsy, disrupted his learning. According to Sue, "Teachers refused to teach, sidelining him from computer class. Bullying and taunting were part of those years. Fortunately, high school offered a life skills program, which included art, music, ceramics as well as the biology classes that interested him." The Special Olympics also enlisted his high school to do unified volleyball and basketball, where he was a superstar.

After graduation, however, things unraveled. There were no longer any specialized programs for Bryan to participate in.

That context set a scene for Bryan to transition into a day program within an agency to begin his job exploration - though no job offers followed. Sue's friend, who had a son with disabilities, also had a small business. Her son met Bryan and they both began selling at the shop and doing volunteer work at various jobs, from hotels and retail stores to the RIDDC's Small Business Saturday SHOPRI event.

Bryan met Dean, a photographer with disabilities, along with his staff support person, John, exhibiting at that event. Three weeks into the photography classes offered by John, Bryan's talent was discovered. Sue reports the instructor's advice: "Bryan needs to stop selling. You need to do something. He really has a good eye. And you need to talk with Sue Babin."

Bryan's mother was already familiar with Sue Babin, whose extensive work within the I/DD community was well known. Sue Babin registered him in the next round of RIDDC's Self-employment Business Series. Mom, Bryan, and Megan - Bryan's support staff - took the class from the couch.

Since Bryan's mom has her own small business selling honey at Farmers Markets and other similar channels, the trio had all of the tents, chairs, and supplies - as well as the selling skills and entrepreneurial basics - to sell Bryan's photographs at various Vendors' Marketplace events.

Bryan's father, Cliff, helps out as well, taking Bryan all over Rhode Island and Massachusetts to take his photos and also assisting with editing. Double B Photography Studios launched, the perfect name given to Bryan Baron by his basketball coach.

With lessons from his school experience, acquaintance with personal selling, and newly acquired photographic skills underscored by the RIDDC's Business Development Series

classes and business mentor and peer support as well as family supports in place, Bryan was in a good place.

When asked what about the classes helped Bryan, Sue replies “Marketing. That was a blessing. We weren’t doing anything, no social media, or scheduling posts as discussed in the continuing weekly networking meetings. There was a lot of good information for a brand-new business.” Bryan was out in the community, talking to people, connecting with them.

Learning how to make their tables stand out and where to buy materials to properly hang and display the photos were part of the ongoing weekly meetings where experienced vendors shared information with newbies and marketing strategies became real for everyone.

As if capturing nature’s best images isn’t enough, Bryan’s work also appeared on covers of North Smithfield’s monthly publication to homeowners. He’s added publishing to his resume along with the photos and framed prints he sells in-person and online.

He can wait patiently in the woods for the bald eagle to be in just the right spot for just the right shot. He remembers all the details of every shot, from birds, bunnies, and goats to landscapes and seascapes. He has grown professionally and personally, all with good result.

“I’m the boss” is imprinted on his T-shirt, one that has become highly recognized among the RIDDC small business owners as well as on their videos. Sue laughs and says, ‘He likes work and making money, but also all of the connections he’s made and people he’s met.” Watching him in action, it’s hard to imagine that Bryan was once shy. “People come up to him at vendor shows, at the park, and there’s a lively conversation about an image, and what his print or photo means to them.”

Connections with people through his photographic work, his love for and ability in sports, and the new relationships forged through shared business start-up experiences create a memorable snapshot of Bryan at 29. With supportive family and friends surrounding him, there’s very good reason to expect the album of his life to be beautiful!

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