

BREAKING BARRIERS

everybody belongs ■ everybody serves

THEME: EMPLOYING PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

Workers with disabilities can transform a work environment in unexpected ways. In this issue, *Breaking Barriers* readers who employ people with disabilities tell stories of lessons learned.



📷 Tony Rodriguez loves the technology of pianos

Performing to a High Standard

by Paul Helm

Westminster Presbyterian Church, Grand Rapids MI

When my wife and I were asked to host a house concert for a group of student musicians, we agreed but recognized a problem. Our piano had not been tuned since we last moved and was in desperate need of maintenance.

Crowdsourcing online for piano tuners identified the highest rated and most reviewed in Grand Rapids. While reading reviews to narrow my choice, I discovered an article about Tony Rodriguez, and it struck a chord with me because he said that he has autism.

Many people shy away from others who are “different,” and their reluctance sometimes can take the form of prejudice, discrimination, and even racism. I was touched by the story of Tony learning to play piano but preferring to crawl inside and

explore how it worked. So I invited him tune our piano.

Tony’s online scheduling system works well, and he has robust communication that allows everything to be handled without communicating in person. Confirmation emails explained his autism and how he works best. All of this is clearly by design; as he states, “Piano technology is my strength. Social communication is not.”

The process was effective, informative, and demonstrated sincerity. He closed one email with, “I look forward to meeting you and working on your piano. Your willingness to give me the opportunity to provide a quality service means so much to me. It gives me a place in a world that often overlooks who I am as an individual and a child of God.”

After he left, I wrote an online review, including:

The proof is in the results, and Tony did a great job. When I called, his voicemail said that he preferred to communicate via email, which is not a problem. I had read up on him before calling (news articles, his website, and reviews), so I knew he had some form of autism. Shortly after scheduling, he sent an email explaining more about him and his condition. I appreciated his professionalism, and the appointment went without any issue.

Our piano was ready and sounded beautiful at the house concert.

From Apprehension to Appreciation

by Hannie Fledderus

Wellandport United Reformed Church, Wellandport ON

When we were asked if we would consider giving Eddie a chance to work on our farm, we were apprehensive. We thought that we were not equipped to handle someone with an intellectual disability, but that has completely changed!

Eddie has taught us that we all have gifts and talents to share with others. He taught us to focus on what you can do, not on what you can't do. As it turns out, all we needed was some patience while we learned what Eddie was capable of, what type of jobs he could handle, and what type of motivation he needed.

Eddie loves coming to work every day with a lunch pail, just like his dad and brothers do. When he gets to work, he loves to talk about his weekend adventures, about hockey and the Maple Leafs, and about farm equipment. He takes his responsibilities seriously and takes pride in having a job, doing it well, and being included as one of the guys. His responsibilities include cleaning mangers, sweeping floors, helping with the calves, and general cleanup. Eddie has learned to work with others, to follow instructions, and to complete his barn chores independently.

We are grateful for the opportunity to have Eddie join our team. He has been a true blessing to our family. He brings joy and enthusiasm, and he reminds us what is important in life: to love, to honor our Lord, and to serve each other.



📷 Eddie takes pride in having a job

A Farmhand and Friend

Our son Eddie is 24 years old and has a designation of moderate-to-severe intellectual disability. He came to us as a foster child for a respite placement at the age of 6 and became a permanent member of our family two years later.

After graduation from our local Christian high school, we wondered what to do. He couldn't stay home with me, his mom, every day! He began doing piecework at a local greenhouse for a couple of hours a week, but that wasn't enough.

I manage a group home for adults with developmental disabilities. One day I mentioned to a staff person that Eddie was looking for more work. Her family runs a dairy farm, and one of Eddie's favorite things is John Deere tractors. I asked whether they might have something he could help with on the farm.

Her family decided to give it a try. Eddie started by working from 8 a.m. to noon every day, and he was over-the-moon excited and jumped in with both feet. Today Eddie works at the farm from 8 to 4, five days a week.

Even more important than the work, he has built relationships. Our hearts burst to see him included as a valued worker, friend, and even family member. He has social connections that never would have happened had this opportunity not opened up.

—Marlene Vanrootselaar

More online

Along with large print, audio, Spanish, and Korean versions of this issue, look for a web-only article by Brooke Lowin ("A Custodian and Connector") in the *Breaking Barriers* section of the Network website at bit.ly/BBWinter2018



Invisible, in a Good Way

by John DeBoer

Clearview CRC, Oakville ON

Zachary has worked at King's Christian Collegiate High School for five years. He works with Andrew, director of facilities, and with Yaneth in the cafeteria. When we hired him, we thought we were helping this man with a disability by providing a good workplace with meaningful purpose, which sounds altruistic. In the end, we have learned that Zach is the one who is providing a good, purposeful workplace for the rest of us.

Listen to what Zach's fellow employees have told me about working with him:

- "Zachary changed my preconceived notions about working together."
- "Zachary loves people and people love him. Zachary loves hugs. Zachary greets me every day and asks how I'm doing—and he waits for a good response. He makes me slow down."
- "Zachary loves to get his work done."
- "Zachary is at his best when he knows exactly what is expected. Once he knows his routine, then we can also give extra things."
- "Zachary loves his music and loves to dance—but only on his breaks. I think we all wish we could so readily express our inner joys."
- "We miss Zach when he's not at school."
- "Zach will sometimes try to get away with things—like taking an extra sandwich. But who can blame him? We have great sandwiches!"

So what have we learned? Acceptance. Joy. Clarity. We have learned that we can understand all people differently—that there is more to each person than what we see on the outside. Last year, Zachary was a guest at a school chapel. We wanted to thank Zachary for his work at King's as an exemplary employee. At one point there was pure, spontaneous, exuberant applause from staff and students. That really says it all.



Zachary makes everyone better

Zachary values his work at King's. If it's possible, we value him even more, even if in the day-to-day work of the school he becomes almost invisible. Good invisible, I guess, because he has become etched into the identity of life in the halls of the school. He models love, hard work, joyful living, and reliability.

I didn't mention that Zachary has Down syndrome. He is not valued as an employee despite his disability, or because of it. Zach is a valued employee, period. He makes all of us at King's better.



Upcoming themes

Spring 2018—Welcoming worship

Churches can help people with disabilities feel welcome (or unwelcome) in their worship. Do you have a story about welcoming (or unwelcoming) worship? Please send us a note (no more than 400 words) by February 21.

Summer 2018—Aging and disability

The average age of people in churches and throughout North America keeps increasing, and the percentage of people with disabilities increases with age. How are church members 65 and older encouraged to participate and use their gifts in ministry? How does your church minister with shut-ins or those with dementia and/or hearing, physical, and visual impairments? Please send us a note (400 words) by April 18.

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Leading with Ability

by **Tim Sluiter**

Pastor, First Reformed Church, Baldwin WI

Labeling a box so you know what's inside—usually a good thing. Labeling people—not a good thing. Technically speaking, the word *disability* means an inability to do something. Unfortunately, it has become a label that often gets misinterpreted as the inability to do anything.

November 2017 marked six years since First Reformed Church hired Cassie Lokker* to serve as worship director. While Cassie's visual impairment was certainly discussed in the hiring process, it was clear that her disability did not mean the inability to do anything.

In fact, it was Cassie's musical abilities, not her disability, that caught my attention when thinking about hiring someone to lead music at our church. Here are some of the things we have learned since hiring a person with a disability:

- Open, honest, and ongoing communication is essential. We must be able to talk about what accommodations are needed, what parts of the job will require assistance, and what things might need to be delegated to others.
- We are better able to recognize our own limitations. While not physical in nature, my inability to ask for help from others is disabling in its own way and affects my capacity to serve effectively as a pastor.
- We have a fuller understanding of what it means to be the body of Christ. Incorporating a person with a disability on our staff has helped us to become aware of the ways we easily exclude others.
- It provides a tangible opportunity to live and love like Jesus. Like any job, working alongside others demands that together we practice the fruit of the Spirit.

**Cassie Lokker has a visual impairment and is legally blind. She also serves as the disability advocate for First Reformed Church and as the regional disability advocate for Minnesota Classis (RCA).*



Editor's note

Who, Me?



When I interviewed for my first job at age 16, I assumed nothing would come of it. I'd been walking with crutches for many years and was looking for something part-time that I could do primarily from a car. My dad had another idea.

Given my love of sports and good grades in English, he encouraged me to apply for a part-time sports reporter position that was advertised in the local daily newspaper. With my disability, lack of experience, and low self-esteem, I couldn't imagine much to support my application.

To my great surprise, the sports editor invited me to interview. I made my way up two flights of stairs to the newsroom of the *Joliet Herald-News* and talked with John Harmon for 20 minutes. I completed a writing assignment and then thanked him for considering me. I was shocked when he called a few days later to offer me a job.

That opportunity in 1973 opened a world to me that I never dreamed possible, and it happened because of one person's encouragement and another person's willingness to take a chance on a shy kid with a disability.

Do you know today's unemployment rate for people with disabilities looking for work is more than double that of people without disabilities? If you would like to be an advocate for change but don't know where to begin, check out the Putting Faith to Work website (www.puttingfaithtowork.org).

—Terry DeYoung



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