

Angel – Her Story
interview by Cathy on 4/16/15

Was there a time when you didn't believe you could work – what was that like for you?

Yes. I was in school at the time. I wasn't on medication and I started having a rise in symptoms of depression. It was so bad I had suicidal thoughts. I didn't have support from my family. Although I had a long work history, I was so down I didn't think I could work again. I didn't go anywhere, I didn't do anything.

What made things shift? What happened that led you to begin to believe that you could work or think about a work future?

I saw a flyer about Working Wonders supported employment and how they help find jobs. This gave me hope to know there was a service that could work with a person's ups and downs. I got on medication. My case manager told me I had to have a certain number of appointments before I could be referred to supported employment but I just decided to call the number on the flyer. I remember that call. The person that answered said I sounded really good on the phone, like it was a skill. I was praised for being me and I could tell it wasn't fake. This was surprising because most people, when they think about a disability like mental illness, don't want to work with someone like that; they would be worried.

What tools or strategies supported you in taking new steps? How did you overcome fear, gain strength?

Before supported employment I tried a different employment service. I wasn't getting anywhere, not knowing what to search for. When I joined supported employment I filled out a personality sheet to help find my strengths. Being around the employment team, instead of isolating, really helped me to overcome my fear. We practiced interviewing and I got help with applications. Once I set my mind on moving forward, I put my all into it. It took a long time but we just kept searching and I didn't give up. There were lots of other things that added up to make a big difference. Like getting appropriate clothes – Voc Rehab paid for them and Working Wonders helped me to order them through a special catalog on the internet.

What were some of the twists and turns in the journey towards work? What caused barriers and how did you overcome them?

I was homeless at first, couch surfing. I felt I was in the way. My employment specialist suggested the Kools program to my case manager to help me with housing. I got an apartment of my own. Once I landed a job, I couldn't afford to pay for transportation to and from work. Working Wonders transported me regularly, making working possible. I continued to fight

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depression and it was hard to find the energy to work. My employment specialist made a giant calendar – for four months I marked my accomplishments. Communicating with co-workers was hard because I had been so isolated that I was socially awkward. I didn't talk much, I just did my job. Over time, I learned to be more open. I did this by consistently showing up for my work schedule and eventually becoming myself again.

Once I made it through all of these barriers, we were given notice that the store where I worked was going to close their business. My employment specialist helped me identify a new job in a new area of interest, care giving. She developed a relationship with the hiring manager and went weekly to advocate for me. I got hired and worked my retail job and care giving job at the same time for 6 months. It was overwhelming again affecting my mood. I continued to be supported with new job clothes, positive reinforcement and ongoing transportation.

Where are things now? Where do you still hope to go?

Life is awesome. I have had a job for two years providing care giving to a client I really enjoy. I actually look forward to going to work. I have a new goal to be a dental assistant. I am saving money for this now. I remember when my goal was just to get out of bed. Other people can see the change. Someone that knows me said recently, "You look so much happier". It shows.

What did you learn about yourself as you think about your story?

I realize I have come a long way! My self esteem is higher and I feel like I have accomplished something pretty cool. I'm pretty shocked – I am more the person I was meant to be. I realize that although there is nothing wrong with having "less", it is great to do nice things for myself. Like one time I really wanted a flat screen tv and I was able to tell myself I deserve it. And recently I bought an elliptical. Working allows me to get things I need and want and not feel guilty.