LOOKING FOR A JOB
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BUSH FOUNDATION COMMUNITY INNOVATIONS GRANT (Autism Society of Minnesota)
Improving employment and post-secondary outcomes for students with disabilities.

“I’m looking for a job. I’ve already applied to a couple of places,” this young man tells me. He is 18 years old and determined. He is very articulate with good social skills. Except for a few social quirks, you wouldn’t be able to tell he has autism.

Gary is what we call “high functioning” in the neuro-typical world. Gary is not alone at this community conversation on how to improve post-secondary and employment outcomes for students with disabilities. He is accompanied by his father, Glen.

Even though Gary is 18 years old and has an individual education plan and receives special education services, no one has told Gary or his father that the school needed to start identifying Gary’s interests and skills back in ninth grade and work with him and his parents to help him reach his after high school goals. In fact, the community conversation tonight is the first time Glen has even heard about the word “transition” even though his school is required by law to provide it.

Another mother, Elizabeth, shares that her school district told her they didn’t have a transition program for her 18-21 year old and she at that time didn’t know any difference, but knew she needed to do something to help her son. So she moved him to a district that had an 18-21 year old transition program.

Yet sitting amongst them is one young man who is in a different school district that has worked with him early and helped him identify his love of cooking. He will be attending a community college to study culinary arts next spring.

Most often, many of the stories have at the core that students with disabilities aren’t given options because of low expectations for their future—they are told they will never go to college and never have a job. Unfortunately, that becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy as around one-third of young adults with disabilities will be sitting at home—some in the basement playing video games — while their parents frantically try to figure out what to do next in a myriad of un-connected systems with information in multiple places. Only the savvy survive in this world and parents at the community conversation (the more savvy) worry about those who are overwhelmed and don’t have the energy or resources to persevere like they have—an awareness bore out by struggle themselves to help their child and not wanting that for one more parent. We all worry as we look around the room and don’t see enough diverse faces and no business owners.

Amid the participants are a few passionate teachers. Sometimes they have their heads down while they hear these stories, but they, too, seem determined to forge onward despite system barriers that get in their way. Others are here as well – higher education professionals, independent living center staff, vocational rehabilitation service providers, and more.

For two hours the group shares the personal challenges about special education transition in their community, brainstorming solutions together, networking together, and most generally go home with ideas on how to do one small thing in their community now. The exchange is respectful and authentic and to me it’s magic.
I’ve facilitated seven community conversations so far with five more to go in our state. I still have to do the usual data and report writing that comes at the end that distills all the themes and input I’ve received as part of the community innovations grant, but in the end, I want Gary to know that his community as well as myself are looking for a job for him and for the many youth who have so many talents and abilities to offer.