“Think of where YOU would like to work.” It was just eight words, but they launched a life-changing journey. Julie had worked in a sheltered workshop her entire life, and when services began with Iowa Vocational Rehabilitation Services (IVRS), she was earning $2.00 an hour. When her IVRS case successfully closed, she was earning over $11.00 an hour and working independently in community employment.

“She was 57 years old and had NEVER worked in competitive community employment,” shares her VR counselor, Rhonda Draisey.

IVRS Business Director Michelle Krefft had established a partnership with Kwik Star, a grocery and gas store chain with 500+ stores in three Midwest states. “Kwik Star prides itself on customer service and saw a need for modified retail helper jobs,” noted Michelle. “It allows necessary work to be completed while freeing up time for guest services staff to focus on customers.”

“I am doing work that I choose to do. I love my job.”

And so, with the help of her IVRS team and supported employment services, Julie was offered a job and a star was born. Among coworkers and store guests, her smile and customer service shine; Julie is considered an integral part of the Kwik Star team.

In October 2018, along with Kwik Star management and IVRS’ Krefft and Draisey, Julie’s journey took her to Washington, DC. She had never left Marshalltown or flown on a plane, but there she stood, sharing her story at a federal briefing on Capitol Hill.

She told of her happiness in being a part of the store team, and pride in the additional wages she earned. “I am doing work that I choose to do,” conveyed Julie to those in the audience. “I love my job.”

Kwik Star has been a business leader in recognizing the talents of individuals with significant disabilities, receiving national recognition for their employment efforts. They also embrace the philosophy of Employment First, a belief that with the right supports, people with disabilities are capable of competitive, integrated employment.

For Kwik Star, the qualified applicants provided by VR fills a business need, enables process efficiencies, and offers workforce diversity. It makes good business sense.