

# APSE Conversations: Meet Wendy (CA)!

October 14, 2021

URL: <https://apse.org/wendy-california-ndeam2021>

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Hi this is Julie Christensen with APSE. We're excited to launch the APSE employment first employment for all podcast as a new way to connect with you. This podcast is a way to provide updates, real time advocacy alerts and information related to all things Employment First, be sure to subscribe so you don't miss an episode, and thanks for listening.

Erica Belois-Pacer

Welcome to another National APSE podcast. We've been busy this month really recognizing and celebrating National Disability Employment Awareness Month, and in so doing, we have met and reached out to a number of folks that have had success with employment, and we're highlighting them in a variety of ways. So today, I have Wendy with me and Monday is from California and I'm going to let her introduce herself and just you know kind of talk a little bit about her journey with employment and you know maybe some suggestions that she has for other folks in similar situations. So Wendy, you right introducing yourself to our listeners.

Wendy Chouinard

Thank you. My name is Wendy Chouinard, and I worked for the Helen Keller National Center. I work as a placement specialist for this, for here for Southern California. I cover the areas from right on the border of Mexico, all the way going past Fresno. So, it's a quite big chunk of area to cover. However, about two years ago Helen Keller National Center started a program out here in California because we have so many deafblind individuals. And there's a huge demand for services for employment services specifically. So we started the program two years ago we created what's called the CSP team community provider for this region and we collaborate with the Department of Rehab. So that is what basically I do, I'm very fortunate to have a really great team that I'm working with. And as of now, we've been able to truly find employment for several deafblind individuals.

Erica Belois-Pacer

That's great, Wendy. Now, Wendy, do you have a disability yourself?

Wendy Chouinard

Well, I do not, um, my brother. I have a sibling who had AD, has ADHD has was first diagnosed when he was about five. So, given that situation, and the struggles that he went through, I've always kind of been drawn to this community, any community with a disability has always been a very big passion of mine.

Erica Belois-Pacer

Absolutely. I'm guessing this is probably not your first job, so I could be wrong. I'm just curious if, you know, when you were growing up, or maybe in high school, if you thought you might be working with folks with disabilities. In terms of employment or if you were maybe taking a different path.

Wendy Chouinard

Actually, my parents are both refugees, and when we moved here to the US. It was a very difficult struggle and seeing the struggles of a, of a marginalized community. It's always been something that I've as a child I saw the struggles, and also the kindness shown by a lot of people. So I always knew that there was, you know, life doesn't life said to and of course, sometimes you pick it sometimes you don't. But the core is that life chose for me was one of advocacy. And when I graduated from high school, I just thought I was going to go into criminal justice I'm going to be a social justice warrior of some kind. And it was in high school, right before I graduated, I met a group of deaf, blind individual. And when I first met deafblind individuals, it sort of opened up this whole new area that I was not aware of another marginalized community. So the passion that I had for refugees now also opened up to the deaf blind individuals so that was the course to take and from the age of about 17 I knew that I was going to be working with deaf blind individuals or deaf blind individuals, and just my whole career, starting right. It started off with working with individuals with various disabilities, and then I went into doing legal work, I used to interview clients for what used to be called Nakata, was, was an immigration application, it was immigration process for those that were coming as refugees from Central America, and then right after that I started interpreting for the deaf blind. And it just, it just gradually moved on to where I am now, which is the Helen Keller National Center which is, to me where I feel the most passionate about.

Erica Belois-Pacer

That's amazing. No. Wendy, what country are your parents from?

Wendy Chouinard

My parents came from El Salvador. I'm not too sure if a lot of individuals are aware of but we went through a horrendous civil war. And a lot of in the 80s A lot of people from El Salvador, moved over to the US, and they sought refuge either here or in Canada. So definitely, there's a big community out here, have, have people of refugees or so people who offer political asylum had to kind of start over their entire life and my parents as well. My dad was working for the government. My mom was a student at the University, and they both had to flee in order to save their lives and to save the lives of their future children as well.

Erica Belois-Pacer

Actually, previous to working where I currently do have a worked with a lot of refugees. I know the term here, often uses "new Americans" as well just on language development and also with trying to pass the citizenship test so I am actually familiar with what was going on. Did your parents...so your dad worked for the government in El Salvador?

Wendy Chouinard

He did. He was working for the government for quite a few years before the war erupted. And during the war, the ones that were most targeted were either government workers, or students. So, a lot of the professionals, a lot of the intellectuals, a lot of the artist. They were the first ones to be massacred, during the Civil War. And a lot of history was lost to libraries were born, were burned. So as the Salvadorian, you'll find that it's really hard to find a lot of historical information about your country because a lot of it was destroyed during the Civil War.

Erica Belois-Pacer

Wow. Do you still have relatives that are living there currently?

Wendy Chouinard

I have extended family members that live there. I'm not close relatives but I still do have some extended family members.

Erica Belois-Pacer

So you do have connections, that's good. Um, yeah, such dynamic stories I know from so many different countries and I don't think that people always realize what you know why people want to be here, and, you know, the sacrifices that they often had to make to try to get here. Were your parents able to find employment in the US?

Wendy Chouinard

Thankfully, my dad was able to find employment. There was a, a Salvadorian run news channel or show more so that was really popular out here. So my dad was able to start working with him, so he did devote a few years to media. And then from that he went to print, there was the Spanish newspaper that was run over here as well and he started to do their media pages. So he was able to find his niche, he was able to do something that of course it was not at all what he was doing in this country, but it was a new life you know you're reborn every time you're, you move to a different country by floors. You truly do have to transform yourself, you know, and he did. He was very resilient, and that resilient attitude that my, my father showed has always stuck with me, you know, ended up ice to, I bring that into the, into the profession I do now because I see barriers. But at the same time you see solutions as well. And if my upbringing has, has given me. It truly has given me so much but it definitely did train my brain that way, you know, if you say no I will find a way to make it uh yeah.

Erica Belois-Pacer

I was just gonna say I'm guessing it had a huge impact on your school life, or life in general.

Wendy Chouinard

Yeah, it is and to see everyone as a true individual despite either the physical differences or other types of differences, you know, we are in this together, and there is no time there is no room for any type of any type of exclusion or hatred or any of the isms.

Erica Belois-Pacer

Yeah, I totally agree. Oh goodness. I don't know, I know the current climate across our country has been challenging for some I think for sure and, hopefully, you know, more folks are able to kind of think the same way you do. Just out of curiosity. Is your brother still in school?

Wendy Chouinard

My brother is not in school anymore. No, he's um... I don't want to say his age,

Erica Belois-Pacer

No, that's okay. I was just hoping that he had support, you know, was able to be successful in school and then hopefully exiting and finding, you know, a path that works for him as well.

Wendy Chouinard

You know I do have to say that at the time. When you come from another country. There is a lot you don't know about the system here. And a lot of information is missing you know you're deprived of a lot. And nowadays it's a lot better, of course, but in the 80s, a lot of information that was there, readily available was not readily available to someone who did not speak English. And so because of that I feel my parents were not well informed on how to best support. My brother. So there were a lot of gaps in his education there was a lot of supports that could have been provided, but we're not, not because they were not there, but just we were not informed properly. And, and that happens. Any, any marginalized community, you know, even with the deafblind community I find that there's resources out there but how will they know that there's resources out there, unless we do outreach, you know unless we bring this information to them make that effort to truly make them to empower and inform this community. So that's, you know, happens with any community that's marginalized it, it's just a lack of information, there's the gap somewhere a breakdown. And that happened with my brother, I feel. Thankfully he did better for himself, but there's so much heartache that could have been avoided had we had full access to the information back then.

Erica Belois-Pacer

Absolutely. And I think, yes, I think there have been improvements made across the board, but I think there's probably still a lot more work to do so. Oh goodness, oh. Wendy, do you mind sharing maybe a few success stories you don't have to use names or anything like that but of just folks that you've worked with, to help them find employment is?

Wendy Chouinard

Definitely ... definitely the one that always sticks out the most. He's a young man from Vietnam, who will tear when he was about 17. Previously he had what we called no formal language established about the age of 23. He started to lose his eyesight. He loves anything culinary. He has a passion for cooking, and at the age of about 23 When he started to lose his eyesight. He was working at a Marriott. And he tells me that the day that he lost, he noticed that his vision was, was diminishing was when he says he was, he was cooking something, and then all of a sudden he could not see his hands became very blurry, you know and he had a hard time seeing on his on his peripheral. And he says he felt so confused. And he got really scared that he just left. You know, he, he left for the day and never came back to his job at the Marriott. He

reached out to the department of rehab, and the department of rehab was able to connect him to the Helen Keller National Center, where he went for training. Okay. The Helen Keller, the Helen Keller National Center has a training center in New York. So not too far from you.

Erica Belois-Pacer

I was actually just gonna say I'm fairly familiar and I do know a number of folks that through the years that have collaborated with us here at national and our New York State APSE so I'm just actually gonna bring that up but I'll let you continue.

Wendy Chouinard

Great, great people. So he went for training, came back and was trying to find employment for about eight years without any success, but still wanted work in the culinary field, you know, he had a lot of experience, and he was worried because he also has two elderly parents that he's responsible for as well. So as a deaf individual and now losing his eyesight, which now he's considered deaf blind, get a lot on his plate. You have a lot of family responsibilities and dealing with his own new identity as well, was really difficult for him. And not to mention that there was also language deprivation that he was experienced experiencing as well so when we first established the CSP team out here in California. He assigned to me. So as a deaf individual and now losing his eyesight, which now he's considered deaf blind. Get a lot on his plate, get a lot of family responsibilities and dealing with his own new identity as well. It was really difficult for him. And not to mention that there was also language deprivation that he was experienced experiencing as well so when we first established the CSP team out here in California. He assigned me to work with him. So after about eight years of not finding employment, I said okay, what is it that you want to do, and it was really clear that he wanted to work as a chef. So then we built. We built this model for him, you know, and said, This is what you want to become. This is the road we need to take the steps to take, and he said, Well, I have a few requirements, he said I want to 401k, he was well informed about that, because I want to work full time. And I want something to do with the Marines. He says I want to work in something that can support my country, you know, the US so. And that was a difficult task because it was very specific and we went, you know, we had about eight different interviews, and he was not interested because they did not fit the criteria, and I really have to applaud him for that because he knew what he wanted. He was determined to get it, You know, and I admire that determination his positivity so it came to mind that we have a partner called Sodexo and I always mispronounce company's name and I'm terrible at it. It's a French company, but they work in good services, and I found out that they actually serve our men and women in the military, and they have a base in San Diego. So when I found out I contacted the company, and I said I think I have somebody who might be a good candidate for Camp Pendleton, Miss Hall, and they arranged an interview. And the manager at the location just was so impressed with this person. I'm going to call him Katie with Katie, that he was basically hired on the spot. Okay, which is amazing you know he showed his skills he was talented, they hired him, and he came on board full time and if hit all the criteria that he wanted he got his 401k he's able to be a part of the, of the Marines, somewhat, and he's able to to work the full time which is something that he really needed this story actually within two or three months he was promoted from cook one to two. And as we speak, he's working on becoming the chief, Chef. So it's shows how his

determination really did pay off. And at the same time how they can accomplish all the dreams, you know, and I and I like to do that with, with those individuals that I work with, I want them to be able to truly work where they want, you know, not me design a job development plan for them but they need to be able to give me what they want, and and I support this as much as I can and this story actually got so much publicity out here in Southern California, I was on TV. It was on newspapers, and he's now known as the deaf blind, Chef. If you go. If you Google it, you'll find them. And he's living his dream you know he has a dream, and he's going to accomplish it. Because of his financial stability, he's able to support his elderly mom and dad.

Erica Belois-Pacer

Oh that is great.

Wendy Chouinard

That's just one of the stories out here that really touched me because he never gave up. And the idea that you can have criteria and you can get exactly what you want, if you're patient and if you're determined.

Erica Belois-Pacer

Which is huge because oftentimes it does not happen right away, and I mean I think that's for everybody not just people with disabilities. You typically don't start in your dream job, right off the bat and does take a lot of perseverance to, you know, move forward and find what you really love doing. So, Wendy. That's a great story. And I know we're running out of time so I just wondered, Is there anything else you want to share with our listeners or advice that you might have for both employment support professionals, you know, folks like yourself that are working with people with disabilities who choose supports to find employment, or, you know anybody else that you think might need some strategies or incentive?

Wendy Chouinard

I would say the number one thing is, be passionate. If you have passion, you will go above and beyond to make sure that the participants who are working with the consumers you're working with, get what they want. So being passionate, and being passionate also will lead to will not only lead to employment outcomes, but at the same time, it allows you to truly pay attention to the individual that you're servicing, you know, and I think as employment professionals we all try to do that, you know, really try to listen to what they want, and support them. So passion is definitely one thing that we need to, to have and if you're, sometimes we can get burned out because it's not an easy job just honestly, it involves a lot of work, it can be emotionally draining sometimes. So, to not to lose your passion, we have to always kind of remind ourselves why we do this, and self care. If you take care of your health. If you take care of your mental health, you'll be able to keep on supporting others who truly will benefit from the services we provide.

Erica Belois-Pacer

Well, Wendy. Thank you. You are definitely doing an amazing job and I really enjoyed kind of hearing your backstory and probably where you got a lot of your work ethic and just, you know

passion to help folks that might not be an ideal situation at the time. So, thanks so much for joining us today.

Wendy Chouinard

Thank you and again I apologize if I spoke so much. I can, I can definitely talk and when I was younger, my dad had this signal for me that meant like, you've talked enough. It's time to hush, you have this hand signal that when I, when I saw that I knew it was my time to just listen. So thank you so much for listening today and, and I hope that whoever is listening can at least take one takeaway from today's discussion.

Erica Belois-Pacer

Absolutely, and I don't think you talked too long and I probably fall into the same category so you shared a lot of valuable information and I do think that people will gain some insight and ideas from listening so thank you.

Wendy Chouinard

Thank you.

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