

# APSE Conversations: Meet Robert (NJ)!

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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 episode of The National APSE podcast. We're pretty excited that it is National Disability Employment Awareness Month. And we are highlighting lots of different advocates and people with disabilities that have had success with employment and finding jobs that they want to be in. So today, we are meeting with Robert Jackson, and he lives in New Jersey currently and he's going to tell us a little bit about his story on his road to employment. So, thanks for being here. Robert, do you mind introducing yourself and giving us a little background on yourself and kind of things that you have done along the way?

Robert Jackson

Yes, sure. Yes, my name is Robert Jackson, and, like, Erica said in the podcast, I live in New Jersey. I live in Mercer County New Jersey, and the disabilities that I have are traumatic brain injury, Autism Spectrum Disorders, auditory processing Lyme disease. Speech Communication and developmental disability. And my journey with employment started when I went to the Division of Vocational Rehab in the state of New Jersey. Not too long after I graduated high school. And the reason why I worked with the Division of Vocational Rehab because it would disabilities have a hard time finding employment, and the jobs that they're interested in. And sometimes the reason why that happens because their school experience wasn't that great. And no my wasn't expect great because the skills I later learned after I graduated from high school, that those are learn aren't really prepare me for employment, nor College, your vocational school, even though I did go to the vocational school part time, enough in high school, but it was geared toward students with special needs. And it was irrelevant to what was going on at night so that's why I went to the Division of Vocational Rehab, and I was working with the Division of Vocational Rehab I did work with a job coach, who helped me get a job, but the job wasn't a good match. And at that time I wasn't aware of my personality or strengths or weaknesses, because I was fresh out of high school and didn't know what I wanted to do. And I had no career goals at the time, so I just took anything that came my way which I shouldn't have done. But I should have done. I should have evaluated my skills. And I didn't, I shouldn't have rushed it. But even though I did have a vocational assessment in high school, which didn't, which was totally nonsensical because I was more capable where my teachers and my

counselors, gave me credit for. And that's why most jobs that I had gotten on my own. Now the jobs that I had started out with were in fast food retail temp agencies, And most of the jobs were low wages, didn't pay much didn't have any benefits and there was no job security. So as time went on and on and on. And the older I got, and I felt this, this isn't what I want to do for the rest of my life and I've gotten feedback from other co workers who told me. you shouldn't be doing this when you're 50 and 60 years old. It's not a good career path, because anything can happen, and real retail and fast food jobs aren't really career suggest jobs. Now I'm explained with the differences between a job and a career. A job is some no help you get changed. I'll be making money and how we develop skills and how we get by just for that moment. Now, a career is something you have to plan for, which requires skills, sometimes education or depends in a career is something you want to do for the rest of your marriage as with a job. If that's not the case with a job because the job is not what somebody wants to do for the rest of their life that's just a starting point in your walk. Now I decided in 2019 I, well I did start out working for the state of New Jersey in the department Treasury I've been there for over 12 years now. Now it was important for agencies in after well, I've gotten tired of going from bouncing from agency to agency, not being happy with this job. That job so I decided to work with a mentor, on a job for the department treasury. I worked for the mentor for about a year. And we went over my interviewing assessments that type of thing. We went over personality traits or personality traits that decided one day I wanted to be an information specialist and help people with disabilities find the resource that they need in the community. So I did some research on it, I took a few courses. And of course, I networked with other people who work in industry, and that interesting, which is Human Services, and then worked with somebody for an NJ division on New Jersey Council on Developmental Disabilities, and he, we've put together a resume. I told him what I was looking for in a job, what skills I had, and despite the fact that I didn't go to college. It was a good match, because my personality is, I SFJ, which stands for Introverted feeling, sensing and judgment. According to the Myers Briggs, assessment, and wonder career matches what, when I did a career search a career match, and one of my own. Mentees have popped up with CME services. So I say Yay, finally I found something that matches what I'm good at. And it could be me.

Unknown Speaker

That's great. Robert, I'm curious, when did you have your first job, not necessarily your career path but what How old were you when you made your first job.

Robert Jackson

I was in high school when I had my first job I started out, recycling, and then the second year when I was in high school, I worked in the school office, battling papers. But that wasn't what I wanted to do. And then when I turned 16 I decided to give vocational school a trial, could I thought I want to be an auto mechanic, not to autom Auto Service for two years. And then my interest change and I want to do computers. So he put me to office skills program because I didn't have no skills with computers. And then I did graduate with a certificate, a Technical Certificate in office skills. Anyway, after I graduated from high school. They are graduates graduated high school when I was 18 but they encouraged me to stay until I was 21 to finish out my educational attainment, but I felt I really wasn't learning much in school, I wasn't learning

the skills I needed, therapy and for an example with the Office skills program. We worked on Apple computers now in the real world don't work on Microsoft Word, Excel, PowerPoint, all of that stuff. So that's what I had to go back to vocational rehab haven't quit a job at first and 1996 in 1997. And then I went back in 2000. After working few retail jobs and I was getting bored with it, and I said this is what I want to do. So I went back to the DVR in 2000 What would New Jersey vocational New Jersey Division of Vocational Rehab in 2000. And I said, I explained to my counselor I said look, I don't want to be a retail fast food for the rest of my life. So I was interested in this training program which taught me where, Excel, PowerPoint. We did an assessment, and I clicked for the first one for the first day I liked it. It was, hands on, and I learned Word, Excel, Access for the first time, and I completed a program with a certificate. And then later, that's how I wound up. Again, we're starting out working for the state. And I'm kind of glad I went back for more training, because at first I was told that college wouldn't be an option because I was told it. When I first went to DVR that when he did the assessment, the first time, they're like, Will, you'll be better off in a job. wouldn't be appropriate for you, in a way I kind of felt bad because I'd be a good amount when I took the test for vocational rehab at the test my intellectual ability, and he asked my interests. When I graduated when I went out when I was in high school I had an IEP, and they claimed I was reading at a fourth and fifth grade level. Now when I took the test of vocational rehab, which is measuring adult self. I came out of high school, grade level and everything. So I felt. Why am I feeling like I'm being cheated. When I was doing better all along in my IP should have said, I'm working at a high school level instead of working at some lousy grade school level. And that's when I realized I did better than what I was saying, and I think the reason why I didn't want to stay until I was 21 because I felt like I was being held back in school. And I kind of cry that this didn't stay until I was 21 because it wouldn't do me no good anyway, because back then there were no training programs for no common programs for students with disabilities there wasn't much available. And when I was coming out there wasn't hardly anything available for students with disabilities.

Erica Belois-Pacer

It's definitely changed. Robert, I'm thinking we're around the same age because I graduated from high school in 1995 So I'm thinking maybe , I might be a little bit older but,

Robert Jackson

Well, I think I'm 44.

Erica Belois-Pacer

Yep, so am I. But I think a lot of things have changed. I'm curious, um, you said that you know you went back you looked at your interests and was the job coach helpful for you.

Unknown Speaker

No, because, actually, we're not going to be VR. We felt sad at first I wanted an office job, and I felt I went to tech school, then we couldn't get an office job because of what I told you earlier in the podcast, I didn't have the proper skills, people that knew how to follow, and answer phones and that stuff. It was computer part of it but I'm back, because I worked on, we worked on Apple computers, and the program that I was in and out in the real world, they were using

Microsoft Word. And that's where I, that's why I didn't get the job because I went on several different office, interviews, and I never got a call back and letter of no nothing. And that's probably why I didn't get the job that I wanted. So my job coach said, Would you be happy working in the store. And I said yeah, me, Me, me being gobble that took the Java store, which only lasted for a few months, and then I quit. And after the job coach left, that's when they started treating me like crap. And then after that, that's when I quit. I mean, given. I just, I've done that.

Erica Belois-Pacer

So Robert, what do you think has been the most, I guess impactful or helpful thing in terms of your journey towards, you know where you are now?

Unknown Speaker

Well, I had to do mostly everything myself because growing up I didn't see receive much services, you see no assistive technology. The only thing I received in high school was speech therapy I received no occupational therapy, physical therapy, no career awareness, classes, none, none of that stuff. And even on my IEP. I didn't learn daily living skills no appointment skills, no that's and that's what really hurt me, because I thought I was learning what I was supposed to learn, and then kind of find out I was.

Erica Belois-Pacer

Yep make sense. So tell us a little bit about what you're doing right now?

Robert Jackson

Well, right now I work for the state, New Jersey Department of Human Services Division of Developmental Disabilities as an assistant coordinator transition information specialists, I would say motivational speaker Tim because my job is to go out and speak to students, parents, in-school professional about the different programs that are available with people with disabilities, please share my experiences, and tell the students, the choices. The choices that they have now versus the choices that I had when I was growing up, and that they don't have to worry about going through the struggles that I went through because there's a lot more out here for them than it was for me.

Unknown Speaker

That's great. I had, I had a similar job where I got to train school personnel working with students who would be exiting high school with disabilities and options available so I think that is huge. I think a lot of times teachers and families and students aren't aware of opportunities that are out there so I'm sure you're having a huge impact on so many people.

Unknown Speaker

I say I didn't know that my lived experience could help so many people. At first I didn't think that until I read this book called, job search for people with disabilities is by just publishing. And that's where I learned how you can use your disability as an advantage to get a job. I say in Human Services, or working for an agency that serves people with disabilities, you can show us

your lived experience. Even if you don't have a college experience, as long as you had that experience that can equate for the college experience. And that's the same thing with state government.

Erica Belois-Pacer

If there's a lot of folks out there that have been successful, that may not have, you know, gone to college but like you said, have had some amazing and really impactful life experiences that you know by, like you said able to share. It has influenced that others. So, definitely. Wonderful. Robert, is there anything else you want to share with our listeners today just words of advice, or, you know anything else you'd like to share?

Robert Jackson

Well before I go into words of advice, I'm going to say that I've learned a lot and it takes hard work, self determination nobody's going to do it for you. You have to do it for yourself. And the people that are out there, I encourage you, and people with disabilities. Sometimes you have to tell your story, or to get people to listen. See, the more people tell their story, the more people are going to start listening and open up your eyes and say hey, this person can do them out, then we're giving them less credit than what they're capable of. And then after and they're going to say this person can do this this person can do that, why are we holding these people back. So sometimes you have to say something. Speak up, and let them know you're a person too, you have these two you have rights also. You're just like any other human being. Nobody's perfect. Now if that's the case I'd nobody's perfect. The whole world would be classified in categories and categories. Everybody would be in special needs or special ed. But that's not the case. We shouldn't take certain people just because they do things differently and put them in a category, and say, Oh, just because you're. It doesn't work that way or you got all we got to do is just take the time, evaluate the person, you'll be surprised at what you will learn about the person instead of assuming that he can't do anything, because there's when I speak to my students, I see a lot of potential. I don't see labels classifications, none of that stuff. And that's what it's all about. Everybody has wants and needs, everybody has preferences and those, and everybody deserves the night that they want. And just because somebody has a disability doesn't mean they have to clean toilets, work in a fast food restaurant. Bring up clothes, or do jobs that nobody else want to do. It can be just, they can do the jobs that anybody else can do and sometimes better and also learn to do sometimes people with disabilities are more grateful to average out than the so called non typical peers who rather slouch and complain and whine. So I'm just thankful I got to where I am today. Being, somebody gave me a chance.

Unknown Speaker

No, that's wonderful Robert and I agree, people need to do what they want to do not necessarily what is you know, a quick placement or an easy place to find a job so really having that good job match makes a huge difference.

Unknown Speaker

Well I wish I knew early on that my lived experience would have helped me get this, get into the field that I'm in now, and I did attempt to go to Mercer County Community College for two

semesters and it was the biggest mistake, for me, because I wasn't ready for college and I had to start out and meet remedial courses. And I couldn't keep up with the students. So, and, and, and I did have accommodations but they didn't have to work to me good accommodations back then. During accommodations they gave me work extended time on tests, and that was basically because back then they didn't have to assist, they didn't have no cap was where you can put your books on a tablet and have it read to you, or all this other stuff like Kurzweil and all this other stuff. Even though that we have all this other stuff that they have now I still wouldn't want to go back to college because the structure, the self contained class when I was in high school and going to college you have one teacher for each subject. And they're not. We're college is more about having access to the curriculum as well High School is more about success, and yours is to give two different worlds. When you're not when you're in secondary school is more like entitlement. Now when you get into the Congress number one Adolphus is more about eligibility. And just because you haven't had especially in high school doesn't mean you're going to be eligible for everything when you get become an adult, because they're more strict. So that's what I that's what you have to learn to you have to weigh the pros and cons of each. And but there's another support on either side of that, whether you're in school or whether you're an adult.

Unknown Speaker

You are absolutely correct. You know and I guess I used to do a lot of work with trying to explain that to you know students and families, and school personnel that it looks a little bit different and you know how can we do a better job of matching the two systems so that it isn't such a change when someone exits High School, to you know receive similar supports but also you know how can we prepare students before they're exiting high school so they're more successful so.

Robert Jackson

But I think the colleges need to look at what their what the students are learning and actually learn in high school, and modify the curriculum, because if it is curriculum college curriculums. And these courses are related to what you're going to be doing on a job. For example, why should you have to take your English course. We had to write 20 or 30 pages. If you're not going to do that much writing in the first place.

Erica Belois-Pacer

And I think it depends where you're going and it probably depends what your major is, but yeah, I know it is. I mean I often think that when you're in college, you do have more options to take classes that are more specific to your actual, you know career path but oftentimes, you know, people exit high school they're young and I you know I thought I was gonna be a teacher. When I went to college for the rest of my life but my career path has changed so it is, it is complicated and you know, I think as time goes on, things change and adapt, is an example with the assistive technology, there's a lot more I was amazed you know, pens that can record to help with note taking in daily use of being able to listen to things instead of having to read everything. So just a lot of assistive technology that is helpful to not, you know, just people with disabilities but I think everyone you know in society so. But before we head off I just want to

say thank you again, Robert for joining us and do you have any parting words before we hop off for today?

Robert Jackson

Or actually what I meant by taking courses in college I don't really necessarily like for example, A claims investigator, and insurance, insurance investigator according to the US Department of Labor Bureau statistics, or use a high school diploma, but yet they want you to have a bachelor's degree and associate's degree. But if you only really need a high school diploma, why should you have to go to college. If you want to be an investigator, and even if you want to be an accountant, all you need is a certain amount of credits. Why can they just create a certificate program instead of making people take all these courses. If you don't have to take, that's what I'm trying to say, amount of professionals don't really need a college degree, but yet they claim. If you take all these extra courses, again to your job. No, it does. And a parting words that I have. Before we go, I just want to say thanks for giving me the opportunity to speak. And whatever path, and for the people out there with disabilities, whatever path you choose, never fell for anything. Next thing your best. If you want to be nice, a carpenter. If you want to work on computers, go for it. Don't let anyone tell you what you can come out to. They don't got no employer dictate what what you're what you're good for anyway. If you fight for that I've know I've had a number of different jobs too. So, in some one word, he told me if you don't have a college education you can get nowhere as ... Nope, that's not true. So I left and I went somewhere else. And now I'm happy and I'm glad I made the decision that I made the leap. But sometimes, you're not going to go into nighttime enough you're going to have more than one job. And this to find out, find a good career and stick with it. And I'll just let you know, it's possible, it's going to take some time, it's not going to happen overnight but don't give up. And that's all I have for now.

Erica Belois-Pacer

Thank you, Robert. Hopefully we'll hear from you again. So, thanks for joining us for this episode from national APSE, and we look forward to have more folks on this month for National Disability Employment Awareness Month and listen in!

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