

GOING FOR THE GOLD: SELF-EMPLOYMENT

Revolutionary Common Sense by Kathie Snow, www.disabilityisnatural.com

Tony never had a single art lesson in his life. His ability to create beautiful images on canvas was a natural, inborn talent. As a person with a disability, Tony had been waiting for years for a variety of vocational-rehabilitation (VR) counselors to help him get a real job. But the VR counselors did not see a career in art as a realistic, viable choice, so they performed a variety of assessments to see what type of job would be “most appropriate” for Tony.

A couple of job placements were made over the years, but they didn’t work out over the long term. Tony remained unemployed and poor, existing on SSI and waiting, waiting, waiting for the VR counselors to find him another job. In the meantime, he spent his days and nights following his passion—creating beautiful watercolors and other artwork. Living below the poverty level, he had to watch his pennies closely. He often didn’t have the funds to buy the art supplies he needed, so he had to be creative in that area, too. He looked for products that were on sale, sometimes borrowed money from others, and found other ways to stretch the few dollars he had.

After years of waiting, the 46-year-old had enough. With encouragement from friends, Tony bravely took a new and different path to employment. He “fired” his VR counselor and struck out on his own.

Tony connected with other artists in his community, and with a little help from his friends, he is on his way to self-employment as an artist. It’s a little scary, but the fear is greatly diminished by the power Tony feels: he’s in control of his own destiny.

As a child, Beth always loved combing her mother’s hair. As she grew, she moved beyond brushing to arranging her mom’s hair in a variety of styles. And she loved tagging along when anyone in the family visited a beauty or barber shop for a hair cut.

During her high school years, Beth was included in several regular ed classrooms. In her junior year, a voc-rehab counselor joined the IEP (Individualized Education Program) team. He didn’t think Beth’s dream job of a hairdresser was a realistic goal for a person with Down syndrome, but he said the assessments he could administer would reveal what Beth *was* capable of doing.

Turning the tables, Beth and her family decided the *assessments were not wanted or needed*—Beth knew exactly what she wanted to do and could do—and they declined VR services. Beth and her parents had already made contact with a local beauty school and continued with their plans: Beth would enroll in the trade school after high school, with her parents paying the tuition. And getting a real job on her own would be no problem: she had many contacts with people in the beauty business in her community. As an independent contractor, Beth will join the ranks of other stylists who enjoy the benefits of self-employment.

Like Beth and Tony, many adults with disabilities are going for the gold and fulfilling their dreams through self-employment. *It can happen if we believe it can happen.* One’s attitude—not the disability—is the only barrier to a successful career. What’s *your* attitude on the subject?