

ROUGHLY EDITED COPY

MOVING FORWARD: TRANSITION CONFERENCE FOR YOUTH  
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PLENARY SESSION

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>> Excuse me, can I get everyone's attention for one  
minute? I want everyone to know we have a few people left  
to register so we are going to start a couple of minutes  
late. So just hold tight and we will get under way  
shortly. Thank you.

>> JEN GARMAN: Good morning, everyone.

Can everyone hear me? There we go. Good morning,  
everyone.

My name is Jennifer Garman and I am a staff attorney and  
the director here at the Disability Rights Network of  
Pennsylvania, the Protection and Advocacy of beneficiaries  
of Social Security. And so the work that I do focuses on  
barriers to employment for individuals with disabilities.  
We would like to thank you all for coming to the conference  
today. This conference is being funded by PABSS, my  
program, and one of the focuses for the next few years is  
transition. So to see you all here today tells us what an  
important issue this is in our community as well. Before  
we start, I would like to just tell you a little bit about  
how the day is going to go. There will be mic runners in  
every room, so if you have a question, raise your hand, and  
the mic runner will bring the microphone to you.

The day is kind of -- we have a short time span for a

lot of the sessions, there is a meet and greet from 3:00 to 4:00, so if you have a question for a presenter and you don't get time to speak with them during the session, feel free to approach them during the meet and greet session at 3:00.

And I would like to introduce some important people here today. First off, our CEO Eileen Shane is here today. Our current board president, Ken Oaks, is here today. Our past board president, Sherry Kit, is here today and current board member, Larry Conway is here today. So we will start the day by debuting a video that I worked on this summer. It highlights the stories of four youth who have successfully transitioned into employment or post secondary education and some of the youth and their families are here today. We are pleased that they are here. So I just would like to take a minute to acknowledge their presence as well. We have Mary Dunn is here today and she is Brianna Dunn's mother, one of the youth's in the video. And we also have Colleen Tomco here today and she is the mother of Sean Tomko one of the youths in the video. So we are very excited to debut this video that we have been working very, very hard on for the past few months and to kick off the conference. We will debut the video and we will have a speech by Dr. Laura Owens and then we will break out into the sessions so enjoy, everyone, and DRN staff is readily available all over the place today. We all have name tags so if you have any questions feel free to approach us and we will help you any way we can. One last thing, we have a hospitality room so if you need privacy, feel free to go to the registration table and there is a key to the hospitality room and you will be able to access that. Okay. Here is the video. Thank you.

[Applause]

>> JEN GARMAN: Thank you.

Now, we will hear a talk from Dr. Laura Owens on self advocacy and independent skills.

>> LAURA OWENS: Thank you. Welcome everybody this morning. Thank you for being here on a Saturday. I'm really honored when I was asked to present today, I was really honored to present to a group of young adults with disabilities and their family members. It's my favorite population to present to because you are our future. You are the reason I do what I do, and I know that you are the reason that the folks at the Pennsylvania PNA do what they do. I have to thank my friend Cheryl Baits Harris for hooking me up with you guys. I am the executive director of APSE we are located in Washington, D.C. and we are the

only national organization that focuses solely on integrated employment and advancing integrated employment. So I think this is a critical issue, just to give you a quick background, because I only have 20 minutes to get through this stuff. I was a teacher for 12 years at a high school and I worked with young adults with significant disabilities at the high school level. And they all had really great resumes when they graduated high school. Unfortunately, there were no integrated services for any of my students when they graduated. So they all ended up going to segregated facilities where they really wasted away. So 20 years ago I decided to leave my nice, secure teaching position and start an employment agency specific to individuals with disabilities. And 20 years later we are still going strong and we transition youth with disabilities so some of the stories I will talk to you about today are the stories from the young adults with whom I work in Wisconsin but I think it's critical that parents and young adults really take hold and say this is my life, this is what I want to do. And make sure that if you are not working with individuals, either teachers or adult service agencies who aren't getting you what you want, that you find somebody else to do it, because it really is your choice. So I will talk about self determination and employment, because that is very near and dear to my heart. Power point is not my forte. High school is the time to prepare to be interdependent individuals and to advocate for yourselves. That is what we should be really focusing on at the high school level. And what we tend to do is we tend to focus on independence rather than interdependence. Everybody is supported by somebody else whether you have a disability or not.

So I think what's important for us to understand is as young adults with disabilities, that you seek out those people who can help support you. You that should experience a variety of jobs, and a variety of experiences while you are in school now based on your interests. Figure out what your passion is, what gets you up in the morning, what makes you excited, what do you really want to do? What is your passion? And then get different experiences and tell the individuals who are supporting you, these are the things that I want to try. And if people say to you that's not realistic, then find somebody else because in my opinion, there is nothing unrealistic. We all have the opportunity to try a variety of activities. And if we fail, we learn from that. And that's okay.

I failed at a lot of things. I'm sure your family

members failed at a lot of things, I'm sure teachers have failed at a lot of things. That's how you learn. That's okay. So trying a lot of different things. Develop marketable job skills because what employers are saying today is you don't have to know how to do the actual job. But what I want you to be able to do is come to work on time, to dress appropriately, to call in sick when you are sick and not just not show up. And if you are going to quit, which is something that many people do, if you don't particularly like your job or you find something better, what's the best way of doing that? The best way of doing that is to give two weeks' notice. And we don't often think about that.

So really think about those marketable skills. And then think about what are the services that are available after graduation? What are the services that are going to get you to where you want to be? And how can they help you? And find those services and hook up with them right away. I'm sure many of you know this already. That the challenge with transition and because I was a teacher, and an adult service provider and now I work with a lot of adult service providers, the biggest challenge is that you are leaving one system of service, the educational system where you have a mandate to get services and support. And you are leaving that system into a system where there are no mandates. So there is nobody out there saying you get this, you are entitled to these opportunities, these services. There is nothing out there that says that. You have to advocate for yourself. And talk about what you need. Some things I really want to touch on because these are the things I hear from the teachers that I work with, along with the service providers, and sometimes I hear it from young adults with disabilities. There is really no such thing as being job ready. If I ask the people who have jobs in this room, how many people in here were job ready for their jobs when they got it?

Exactly. None of us were job ready. Normally when I have that question, I have two or three people and I put them on the spot, but somebody told you not to raise your hand. Nobody is job ready. We learn to be job ready by doing the -- doing the job. So this idea that we have that young adults with disabilities have to graduate from school and do prevocational work or do some sort of work that gets them ready to be on a job or that they have to demonstrate behaviors that we consider to be appropriate before they can get a job is really very silly because the rest of the world learns how to act appropriately on a job by being on

the job.

We learn how to do a job by doing the job. And quite honestly, when you are in a prevocational program, pre means never because chances of you getting out of that opportunity is very unlikely because we are always going to have a reason to keep you in that segregated area, to keep you away from everybody else and have you prove to us that you can be ready for a job.

So you need to stay away from people who talk about this idea of job ready because there is no such thing as job readiness. You want to focus on interest and supports and that's what employment is all about, your passion! What do you really want to do? And it's up to you to determine what you want to do, not up to what your parents say you want to do, not up to what your teacher says you want to do. It's really up to you. And if you say you want to do something, then we have an obligation, I really believe that, we have an obligation as educators and adult service providers to figure out how to help you gain experiences in is that area.

And you may change your mind. And that's okay. And I'm going to give you an example of my own personal life. When I was growing up, my parents owned a campground in Wisconsin. I helped my dad work every single summer. The assumption was that I was going to own the campground at some point when I didn't really want to do, and the assumption was that I was going to college to be a business major so that I could take over the campground, which I really didn't want to do. But because that was the expectation, that's what my parents wanted, that's what I did.

Soy went on to -- so I went on to college and I got my degree in business and I hate today. I hated the classes, the internship, I hated it, but I got my degree in business, and then, guess what, I said I don't want to go into business and I got my degree in education and I said this is really what I want to do, because when I started doing the business stuff, I didn't want to get up in the morning, I didn't want to go to work, it wasn't my passion, but when I became an educators, when I started becoming a teacher, man, I was there, and I am not a morning person, but I was there at 6:00 in the morning getting my class ready because I wanted to be there. So find your passion, find out what -- passion, find out what it is you want to do and make sure that everything you do, all of the experiences leads you to that path.

So what employers are looking for, employers are looking

for these skills which I talked about before. I think these soft skills are very important and one that I want to point out is the first one, availability and flexibility. I know in school, we go to school Monday through Friday and we weekends off. And I know we go 7:30 to 3:00 or 8:00 to 4:00. But business is looking for people who can work weekends. They are looking for people who can work holidays, people who can work after 4:00, and sometimes, believe it or not, before 7:00 in the morning. So this is something to think about as you are planning for jobs that lead to careers is that you have to start out in those entry level positions, and then you can move into positions where you can name your schedule.

The availability and flexibility is what employers are really looking for, somebody who can say, when you need me to work, I will work, and I will be there. Reliability and dependability, attendance is huge with employers. Many times when I work with the business community they say I would love to hire individuals with disabilities because they have demonstrated to me that they are actually dependable. They will come to work when I need them to work. That's what businesses are looking for.

They are looking for the soft skills like being able to take the initiative, not being told what to do all of the time, being able to work with other people, having team work skills. These are all things that we can work on while we are in high school.

So the key is to focus on your strengths, not what other people think your strengths are, your needs and interests while meeting the needs of the employer because that's what businesses are looking for. Is so, in other words -- so, in other words, it's about what you want to do, what you need to do in order to make sure that you are a valuable employee. These are three young men that I work with that I will talk about in a little bit.

So while you are in high school, some things to think about are your job, but also your career. I think a lot of times -- personally I didn't know what I wanted to do when I was 18 years old. I didn't know what I wanted to do when I was 21 years old. I am 48 years old and I still don't know what I want to do. So it's okay to be changing things around. But you have to remember that a job is something you do for money. It's just something you do, and you get a pay check, and you get money for it and you can use the money to do fun stuff, but a career is your passion. It's what gets you up in the morning. It's what you dream about. It's sometimes a series of jobs that will lead you

to your career, so, for example, you might want to be a veterinarian assistant. That could be a career. So the different jobs you could have to lead you to that career would be working in a pet store, volunteering at the local humane society, working with your local vet. Those are jobs that will lead you to the veterinarian assistant and that will help you get into a college or post secondary education.

This is one of my favorite paintings. It's by Asher if you have ever heard of him, but what strikes me is it it's a group of -- series of staircase that's go all over the place and people are all over the place and this is what I think people's careers look like. Most people don't start out here at the bottom and work straight up to their career.

Most people follow the staircase where they might go to a dead-end and they might need to come back down and go someplace else. And I think that's okay. I learned that from the individuals with whom I worked. I remember Pam was a young woman and she was a young woman with a disability, graduated from high school, and in my mind, Pam was down here, ready to graduate, ready to get a job, and we were going to get her a job. That was my role was as her teacher.

I got her a job at target. I got her a job, she was great, she stopped all of the impulse items, if you have ever gone to target, those items that you are there as you are checking out, you don't need them, that's what Pam does so you can thank her for that. So Pam stocked all of the impulse items. She was there for two years, she loved it. She was great. She was successful, she worked 30 hours a week doing that job and two years later she called me and said, hey, I'm ready for something else now. That was my aha moment, I said are you crazy? This took me so long to get you this job. This is your job. This is your job for life. And then I realized why shouldn't she take these different paths? Why shouldn't she have that opportunity like everybody else? Why should she have to stay stocking at target for the next 35 years? Why shouldn't she be able to do all of these other things?

So we helped her figure out what to do and now, ultimately, she is working in a legal clinic where she is actually transferring all of the documents to the locate courthouse. Now, target was just her job. She now has a career.

This is Matte. Matte is a young woman who is deaf, blind, and has severe intellectual disabilities and I only

point that out because Matte grew up in an institution. Matte's family lived in Tennessee. She grew up on a cotton farm, cotton plantation, and if you look at her birth certificate, her birth certificate basically says she was Negro born in plantation number three. When she was ten years they realized she was deaf and blind. So they moved her to Wisconsin where she was in the institution until she was 22. She lived in the institution but she went to school in public schools so she had both worlds. We helped Matte get an initial job at a local hospital, not realizing and not getting to know Matte well enough, we helped her get this job where she stocked emergency carts. It was great, she loved it. The first couple of days she would go in there and she was fine for an hour or so and then all of a sudden, she would just start throwing things and hitting people and I kind of felt like, wow, what is going on. I mean, I had literally chunks of my hair pulled out and I had a black eye one day. I couldn't figure out what was going on. So we went back and investigated and it turned out that the institution, she actually ended up being abused in the institution.

And the hospital where she was working smelled just like the institution. So the importance of really getting to know people and understanding where they are coming from, because what would have happened and what other organizations said is that Matte is not job ready. She has to demonstrate to us certain behaviors before she can get a job. So we hung out with her at the group home where she was living and it turned out she loved cooking. She loved the smell, the taste, she loved everything about cooking.

So Matte is in her 18th year working at Pizza Hut. I'm not a big fan of food and filth, but this is what Matte wanted and she loves it. She puts together pizza boxes. Is we have now taught her to fill the salad bar. We can tactile communication with her. What she would do is feel the side of the container and initially she would start eating them. So she would feel the black olives and start taking handfuls of them. We had to teach her, no, this is to put in the salad bar. She has been there 17 years. So a good success story that shows you that you can really do things. This is Jamie. And Jamie too, this is her job, she is still in school, and this is a job that will hopefully lead her. She has an official impairment so we have made adaptations for her. What is great about the job is Jamie is integrated, she has no support on the job other than the employers on the job. She set everything up for her and once she fills the salt and pepper she puts them on

the table in the appropriate locations. And her staff, her staff actually taught her 20 to do that. Those are two people for whom we actually went out and sought businesses to help them and to help the individuals with disabilities but we know that most jobs are found through connections and everybody in this room has connections with other people. All of the parents have connections with business owners or other people who own businesses or you work at a business who might know somebody. We know that about 85%, 66 to 85% of all jobs are actually found through personal connections. That's how I found most of my jobs is through personal connections. We can still find jobs using the traditional method but the best way of doing it is through personal connections.

>> This is Patrick, when Patrick was 17 years old, he is now 20, but he was 17 in this picture. Patrick connected in his community. And this is what's so important for young adults is that it can't just be the teachers, the parents and the adult service providers doing everything for young adults with disabilities. So you young adults who you are out there have to know this is your life. This is your opportunity, this is your job. You have to be part of it. Patrick participated in his community. He volunteered at the local humane society. He did all kinds of stuff through his local church. I am not a church-goer, but whatever the candleholders are in the Catholic Church, he did those, he brought up the hosts. People knew him. And he said, you know, I want a job. Everybody else has a job. I want a job. And so his parents started thinking well, let's figure out how we can help him get a job. Patrick every year would go to the Appalachian Mountains and he would help rebuild houses with his church group. And it was a large church group so it wasn't just his church group it was a variety of churches around the country and they were paired up. So he wasn't actually with anybody from his community. He was with a group of people building these houses.

So his job was to paint the bottom of the house and to set up all of the snacks and the lunches and make sure that that was all arranged, and then make sure that the house was painted.

Well, he actually happened to get hooked up in a group with a young man, a 19-year-old college student named Cameron and Cameron was so impressed by Patrick's skill -- by Patrick's skills because he would set up for snacks and call everybody out and say snack time, we all went and had snacks and everything was fine. Patrick would run back and

start painting the bottom of the house and then he would come back and clean up and set up for lunch and he would tell everybody. And Cameron was so impressed and the story is so great because Cameron is a cool young guy and he said, here I am 19 years old and this 17-year-old is showing me up. And he has got a disability because we are all hanging out playing with dogs, doing all kinds of stuff. He immediately goes back and works. It turns out that Cameron's dad owns a large manufacturing company where Patrick lives so Cameron came back and said, dad, you have got to meet this guy. Patrick wants a job, Patrick wants to work and I saw how he works. This is amazing you have got to meet him. So Patrick and his dad and Cameron and his dad got together when they came back from down south, and his dad said this is great, I would love to do this, but, you know, we really don't have a lot of opportunities. They make labels and they put packaging together for hospitals and different kinds of places. He said I don't have anything, but we contract out with a local workshop and we thought that was a good thing and maybe what we should do is bring the work back to tailored label products and then we can have a position for Patrick. It was awesome. I said, that's exactly what needs to happen! So they brought back all of the subcontract work and they hired Patrick. And Patrick is 20 years old and he is still working there. For two years he has been working there through high school. If he wants to work there through college, he is attending -- he is going to the community college and he wants to work for a local PNA that's what his job will be because he was so excited and he wants to tell other people about it. When I asked him if I could use his photo. He said can't I come to Pennsylvania with you, because I will tell my story.

>> So the thing is to think about who is in your network? Who do you know? Teachers, grandparents, coaches, friends of parents, former employers, maybe you worked or volunteered someplace before, neighbors, people who provide service to you, like if you go to the grocery store or you go to the bank or your dry cleaner, you get your haircut, who do you know? Because these are all potential people that may not be able to help you, but may be able to help a friend of yours help get a job.

So what we want to do is we want to make sure that we are creating goals and I love the video that you all saw, the PNA here put together, because this is exactly what I want to talk about. I want to talk about creating your goals, making sure they are measurable. Maybe someday you

want to be a lawyer, great, but there are steps you have to take to get there. Maybe someday you want to be an architect but there are steps you need to get there. And sometimes you will change that idea. Like my nephew wanted to be god, so, you know, I said let's think about this, okay, god is really up there, somebody else kind of has that job, but if you really want to, we can figure out how to make this observable and build those steps to get there. And eventually, he figured out, well, maybe god is not a good thing, so then he wanted to be Santa Claus. It's okay. But ultimately he wanted to be a vet, and he worked his way towards that, and he got his job and he is a vet technician now.

I don't know how I do that, but any way. Goals can be -- oops, job related. So about employment, it can be about the job. It can be career related. It can be how are these jobs going to help me get to my career? Do they relate? Do they connect in some way? It can be educational. Do I need go on to education? Do I need to go on to a technical school? Do I need to go on to a college? Because you can. There are opportunities out there now like never before for young adults with disabilities to go onto post secondary education and that is a viable option for people. So don't let people tell you no. They could be personal. Patrick wants to marry his high school sweetheart who I also support. So, yes, personal goals what, do you want to do? Where do you want to live? Social goals. Who are your friends? How do you want to connect with people? Once you graduate from high school, it's a whole different world. Cheryl and I were talking about that on the drive up here, it's a whole different world. You have all of your friends right there in high school when you graduate high school. You got to find a whole other group or find a way to connect with people. Find out about goals. How will you keep social relationships? What will you do for fun? As a college professor I have a tendency to take three hours for what I could say in 15 minutes. What are you going to do for fun? Set those goals. Go to the Y.M.C.A., what do you want to do, anything you want, but you need to set a plan in place so that you can figure out what you can move forward towards.

Think about what do you really want to accomplish in your life, and how will you measure that progress. And how much time will it get there? And who can support you besides your parents? This is another young man, Kevin. Kevin worked at a shelter workshop for 20 years and he

hated it. He had a ton of what everybody said he had behaviors that escalated all over the place. And I never knew what that meant and I would ask them, what do behaviors that escalate all over the place look like? Is it messy? I don't get it. I don't know what that means. Well, really, Kevin is non-verbal, and so what was happening was Kevin's behaviors were demonstrating to the rest of the world who was listening that he hated being in this sheltered workshop in the segregated facility. He didn't like it there. He didn't like the people, the work there. And so he would work a little bit and then he would get agitated and apparently escalate all over the place. Kevin's passion truly was cleaning. He loved to clean.

And here is the thing, Kevin loved to clean because he loved the smell of the cleaning supplies. So we had to teach Kevin that if you smell too much of the cleaning supplies, there could be a danger. But it actually worked out in our favor, because we were able to figure out how to help Kevin understand not to mix certain cleaning supplies with others by the smell because he couldn't read. So we were able to say when this one smells and this one smells you can't put those two smells together.

Kevin has his own cleaning business now. He has 15 contracts. He makes \$17,000 a year. He is cleaning churches, local churches, the boys' and girls' club. He has now hired his own job support person and he supports that person on his own through the wages that he earns.

His dream, his passion. So self determination, again, Kevin had it. I knew what he wanted. He was a little aggressive apparently, but we wanted him to be assertive and now he has learned to do that. He has pride in what he does. He makes choices on his own. We work with him on evaluating how he is doing.

This is another young man who we start in high school in an internship at a local company. He picks all of the different supplies that get sent out to target and Walgreens and all of those places. And he started out as an intern. This was going to be his job, but then they liked him, he loved it there, and Roger is now working 30 hours a week at this local company.

And he hasn't given up his McDonald's job either, which is interesting, I think it's because he gets free food. So what is your mission? The film talked about that and I thought that was great because this is what I talk to young adults about all of the time. What is your mission in life? What is your ambition? What is your dream? Goal? Target? It can be anything.

And it's up to you to find out what guides you, inspires you, what gets you out of bed in the morning. I got to tell you this story, I know, I have 30 seconds left, but this is a cool story. This is a young man I started working with out of high school, this is Tony. Tony told me I want to work for the Milwaukee Brewers, that's our baseball team in Wisconsin. I know nothing about baseball, so in my mind, if you want to work for the brewers, that means you have to be a baseball player and Tony, you can't play baseball so let's get you any old job. So in five years he had seven different jobs and he quit them all or walked off, whatever. He kept telling me after every one I want to work for the Milwaukee brewers, and I kept saying you are not going to do it because I'm the professional, I know best, right? So we helped Tony get this job. He got it on his own really, we sort of connected him, at the Y.M.C.A. Well, it turns out it's the north shore Y.M.C.A. and it's sort of Hoity toity and one of the local brewers goes there with his family. I'm there supporting Tony. He is handing out towels and the keys for the lockers, and all of a sudden this guy comes up and he says you are so and so and I'm like oh, crap. I'm like, Tony, give him his towel. Your statistics are bla, bla, bla, and I hope this year you do a better job because we need to get to the playoffs. And I'm like Tony, Tony, you can't do that. That's not appropriate. This guy wants to come and work out with his family.

>> I know him and I think if I can motivate him. I said that's not your job. Anyway, this guy came every couple of days with his family, every time Tony would do this. And we really were fearful he was going to lose his job. And a couple of months went by and we got calls from the Y.M.C.A. saying Tony keeps interacting and he keeps forgetting other people and can you work with him. We go back, Tony, you just can't do that. Three months later we get a call from this Milwaukee brewer player. He is a pitcher, I can't remember his name. I thought it was a joke, you know how people call you up, say, hi, President Obama is on the phone with you. Yes, I'm a pitcher with the Milwaukee Brewers. I have an idea for Tony, the young man who works at the Y.M.C.A., he gave me your card. Okay. So Tony is working for the Milwaukee Brewers.

Tony's job is to wash and press with a group of people all of the brewers' uniforms during home games, and then he also washes the uniforms for all of the service people that do like the sewing of -- selling of beer and things like that. He loves it. He does all of these things with the

newsletter and this guy continually talks to him about this. So it shows that your mission doesn't necessarily have to be huge. It just needs to be something that changes your world. It needs to be something that you really are shooting for.

And I will just -- because I know I am almost done. So with your mission, you can choose what I want, you can choose what you value, what you dream, what you hope for, what you want to become. I will tell you the story later at lunch because I'm running out of time but I want you to think about your mission. And this is a mission that one of my former students wrote. I'm a good student, learning what I can from my classes and leaving my negative attitudes and experiences behind, because he had many of them. He was kicked out of all classes and ended up with me. I love my family and respect my parents and brother and sister and I would like to bring beauty to the world. I'm doing that now through my yard work business and this is a young man we helped start his own landscaping business. My final thought for you guys is to be a ripple maker. Make a splash, because you make a difference. This is your life. When you think about when you drop a stone into the water and how the movement kind of makes all of the water ripple, you can be that ripple. And I challenge you today to think about that as you are hearing the great presenters, how you can be the ripple maker and let your life circle on and on. Thank you very much and have a great rest of the day.

[Applause]