

## **“Customized Employment and Discovery, AKA “Horsing Around”**

By Sherry Becker, 2013



Zach is a young man who lives with two dogs, a cat, two birds, three fish, two horses and a goat in Kissimmee, Florida. Kissimmee is the southernmost suburb of Orlando. Zach grew up in Iowa, the youngest of three children. He graduated from Ellsworth Community College with an Equine Training Degree in 2006.

Zach is a horse trainer and performer at the Arabian Nights Show. He usually goes into work about noon and often returns home after 10 PM. His work duties include training horses, giving lessons to other performers, supervising barn activities (cleaning stalls, feeding, watering and exercising the horses) and doing minor veterinary medicine. He works quietly, responding to coworkers when they address him. He does not initiate conversation unless it's to inquire about a horse or to redirect someone's interaction with a horse.

When the show begins and Zach enters the arena, the quiet introverted trainer transforms into a performer. He engages the audience with every smile and movement. He sits up very straight on his horse, the heels of his boots pointed down to the ground, one hand on the reins. He rides fast with confidence and control. He focuses on guests as he rides along the rail and tips his cowboy hat giving them a “thank you and I’m glad you’re here” in one small movement. His energy and passion are reflected in the cheers from the audience.

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When Iowa was awarded an Employment First Grant from the Office of Disability Employment Policy and a Partnerships in Employment Grant through the Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities, six community rehabilitation provider organizations, including mine, had the opportunity to participate in

customized employment training with Ellen Condon from The University of Montana, Rural Institute and Marc Gold and Associates.

The foundation of a customized employment plan relies upon discovery activities that reveal meaningful information about the job seeker. According to the Profile manual written by Callahan, Shumpert and Condon, “Discovery activities provide an array of opportunities to listen, observe, participate and talk with job seekers and their allies while they go about their life routines and the varied experiences of their lives.” The information gathered in discovery activities is compiled into a profile that comprehensively describes the job seeker in a narrative report. The job seeker’s interests and potential contributions, as well as what works and what doesn’t, are used to develop the customized employment plan. When an individual with a significant disability is better understood and described in relation to who they are, rather than through a label or assumptions drawn from more traditional assessments, the potential for developing and negotiating meaningful employment matches dramatically improves.

If you’ve read this far, I’m sure you’re wondering how my description of Zach’s job is connected to this article about customized employment. Zach is my son. I share his story because his success is directly related to his individual set of skills, interests, life activities and experiences. Zach has an intense, narrow field of interest. His dyslexia made academics challenging and negatively impacted his self-concept. As well-intentioned parents we enrolled him in all kinds of tutoring and extracurricular school and community activities, assuming what had worked for our other two children would eventually work for Zach. He continued to ride, but the time he spent at the farm with his horses was limited by our frantic attempts to expand his friendships and life experiences. As a last ditch effort to keep him in school, by getting him out of school, he got a work experience job at a local veterinarian’s office. That job turned his life and attitude around. Zach’s love of animals is a fundamental component of his character. We’d been so busy focusing on reading scores and our preconceived expectations that we almost missed recognizing his unique set of gifts. By capitalizing on his special set of interests, skills and abilities, he has obtained a meaningful, successful career. He’s living his dream.

The discovery process gives us a valuable opportunity to learn about the skills, interests and necessary conditions that will help us identify creative ways people with the most significant disabilities can make valuable employment contributions. Those of us who are lucky enough to have jobs we love, that ignite our passion and make the best use of our unique set of skills, know how important our work is to our overall quality of life. Our communities and country will prosper and thrive if we can tap that potential in all of our citizens.