

How We Were Able to Get a Transition Program in 1990

By John and Joe Angelo

When John was 18 years old and a senior in high school, his mother, Shirley, and I were very concerned because we knew that he was not ready for any kind of employment. He had an experience when he was 14 years old, working in a Salvation Army Day Camp, and that went pretty well, but that was not a part of his school program.

So, we talked it over with John, and he agreed to stay in school for three more years if we could get him some job training. Shirley, John and I decided, that it would be good if John could have some sort of a work-study program which was offered to seniors at our high school if they were not planning to attend college. They worked at a real job site for half of the day, and were in the class room for half of the day. We thought that would be good for John because he could gain real work experience, and at the same time continue to grow in his academic studies, and at least maintain the abilities he had attained in the his 13 years of formal education.

So, for his last IEP of his senior year at IAHS, I asked the Superintendent of the School District to attend. He told me he rarely went to IEP meetings, and would probably send one of his assistants. I said that would be fine, but I thought he would want to attend because it would be the first ever transition IEP of many that would follow when the Transition Bill passed at the time it was in draft form in the legislature. To my surprise, the Superintendent of the school district actually attended in person!

When we attended the meeting, I had a copy of the Special Education Regulations and a copy of the draft Transition Bill. We suggested that he should take part in the work-study program that was already available to a sizable part of the student body. We wanted him to have some inclusion in the classroom, and to have work experience at regular job sites. The only extra expense to the school district would be for the job coaches John would need, and even that would eventually be picked up by OVR and by the Supported Employment program at ICW.

The district was reluctant, but I kept pointing out that the Transition Bill had a very good chance of passing, and that we would do whatever we had to do to get John the experiences he needed for employment during his last three years in school. I never mentioned the words "due process" because I really didn't think it would come to that, but some folks in the room might have considered it to be a possibility.

I'm sure that the reason for the reluctance was stereotypical thinking about people with Down Syndrome. None had ever taken part in the work-study program before. But none of them were as well prepared for the program as John. John was born in 1972, the first year for special education in Pennsylvania.

We reached an agreement that John could participate in the work-study program for six weeks, and then we would evaluate our decision. When we met again after six weeks, the job coach complained that John wasn't staying on task, that he did not try to find things to do when he completed a task, and that he was easily distracted. We pointed out that we knew John lacked the job skills necessary for competitive employment, that we noticed some improvement in his attitude about his work, and that he would certainly make the effort to succeed, and we got another six weeks.

After the second trial period, the job coach said that the progress John had made was terrific, and he had no doubt that he could succeed in obtaining regular competitive employment if he continued to improve. John's experiences included work at a toy factory, a grocery store, a nursing home and at the County Court house in the Voters Registration office. He was successful in all of those experiences. He graduated in June, 1993, became employed at a pharmacy in December, 1993, and will complete 15 years with that company this coming December.

Fortunately, we were able to be active members of The Arc in our county and I took an active role in the work of The Arc of Pennsylvania. Because of The Arc I was always informed of government actions regarding the welfare of people with disabilities, and I knew of best practices that were occurring in education as well as in other services for our constituents. I was able to approach those providing services for John with knowledge and confidence as well as a strong conviction about what was best for him.

So, to The Arc, Thank You Very Much!!