

## STEPS FORWARD

# BC INITIATIVE FOR INCLUSIVE POST- SECONDARY EDUCATION



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## ECONOMIC INCLUSION, WHAT IS NEEDED?

Arden Duncan Bonokoski, Provincial Coordinator

Post-secondary Education is one of the pathways after high school to increase employability, social networks and set up young people to live a good life. Learning, exploring and developing a career identity is an important part of the post-secondary experience for all students. Students with developmental disabilities are no different and are challenging long-held expectations about belonging.

In Canada, the employment rate for people with a developmental disability is about 30%. There is an urgent need to address this drastic and often ignored socio-economic inequity. In this issue, you will read how across the province students and employers are collaborating and changing this outcome.

(continued)

Last year I attended the Inclusion Alberta Family Conference and participated in a session focused on employment presented by Beth Keeton. She opened her presentation by sharing that the mission of her life's work is to break the imaginary link between disability and poverty. A link that is pervasive across Canada. The clarity with which she communicated her mission resonated and has inspired us to communicate and inspire others through the work that is happening here in BC. Our aim is to break this link and support students to build a foundation that will lead to greater economic stability and a better life. One place to start is by debunking the myth that people with developmental disabilities either can't or don't want to work. But how?

To answer this question, we need to look towards the normative pathways that exist for Canadians without disabilities to secure employment, and embed people with developmental disabilities within those same pathways. For most of us, without disabilities, employment and a career are normative expectations. From the time we are young, the adults who care about us hold dreams for our careers and vocations. Kids as young as three are asked what they want to be when they grow up, they play make believe and pretend to work as school teachers or doctors and as they get bigger, are supported by family to perform chores or small jobs often in exchange for an allowance or some kind of pay. Upon reaching legal working age, families and communities invest in providing employment for young people so they can learn to work. Teachers have conversations about career goals which often include discussions of higher learning. Most of the time, kids who have developmental disabilities do not experience this normative pathway. Then, we expect them to know what they want to do and what they are good at once they are eligible for employment services at the age of 19. This strategy of embedding all kids in this normative pathway to employment has shown promise. In fact, the research suggests that young people with the label of developmental disability who have paid work during high school are twice as likely to be employed as adults, this mirrors what we know about the normative pathways for all young people.

Inclusive Post-secondary Education is one of the many extensions of this normative pathway that extend from high school. By embedding the students we work for, in the authentic student experience, they have the opportunity to learn about what they are interested in and to work towards a career that reflects their interests and abilities. These students are challenging long-held expectations that people with developmental disabilities are unlikely to find work and those who do can only hold entry level positions.

In order to support the vision for economic inclusion through our work, we need to be committed to dreaming big, holding high expectations for the capacity of community to include everyone, and to the process of embedding students in normative pathways. Over the last 18 years we have found that it is just as much work to support a student to find an entry level position that does not reflect their interests and abilities as it is to find a job for a computer science student in the technology sector.

The lessons we have learned are that we need to be creative about finding the ideal place of employment for the students we work for. By thinking big, we can find workplaces and customize roles that we may have never though existed, like the quality assurance co-op position at the real-life underwater exploration engineering firm where a computer science student worked for a co-op term.



## WHAT COMES NEXT?

By Jessica Humphrey, Parent

Last week, I went to a 'check-in' meeting at my daughter's high school. Normally, I would panic about these kinds of meetings as it usually means 'inclusion' isn't working and some kind of critical incident has occurred. This time, the meeting was with the Principal and the Integration Support Teacher. They wanted to know what the plan was for when my daughter, Rosie, finished high school- if there was a program of some kind I was exploring that they could support her transition to over the next year. All of a sudden, I grew quite giddy and went from being anxious about our meeting, to being very excited to answer their question.

I'd been waiting a long time to be asked the 'what comes next?' question from the school. Now I realize that people don't ask that question because they assume her path is one that leads to segregation- a day program, or other 'specialized' activity for people labelled with intellectual disability. I feel very lucky to have learned about inclusive post-secondary when Rosie was 6 and so have known for some time that this was an option in our daughter's future. Somehow, just knowing it was possible for Rosie to go to university (in the same way it was possible for her brother), made some of the hardest moments of my life fighting for her inclusion in K-12, worth every minute.

Knowing inclusive post-secondary is an option has made it all that much more important for Rosie to understand and believe she belongs in the same places and spaces as all the other kids. It has encouraged me to advocate for her inclusion in classes I never imagined she'd have an interest in, to modify assignments on the French Revolution and Shakespeare, and to facilitate friendships with kids in her class who now call Rosie one of their best friends.

"Yes", I answered in the school meeting. "Rosie will be applying to study at the University of Victoria. Isn't there a campus tour coming up?" I asked. If they were surprised, they didn't let on. They asked good questions about how they could help with the application process, what courses she should take in grade 12 and where they should send her transcripts. It was the first time in a long time I left a school meeting with a smile on my face.

This week, totally unprompted, a UVic 2019/2020 Undergraduate Viewbook came home in Rosie's bag with a note – Homework for Career Planning Course–Rosie to choose courses she might like to study at UVic. So many choices. Tonight, we'll look through the options together. I can literally feel myself skipping down the normative pathway to adult life for our daughter.

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## **CUSTOMIZED EMPLOYMENT: THE BIGGER PICTURE**

By Carmen Lee

*Carmen has been working with the initiative for three years and has worked as an Inclusion Facilitator at Emily Carr University of Art and Design and now at the University of Victoria. One of the things she has learned as an Inclusion Facilitator is having a cool reusable mug is equivalent to 'street cred' on university campuses and is a great conversation starter.*

Much like all university students, the students who access inclusive post-secondary find a variety of jobs during their time at school. For some students, they may experience their very first job, a job they absolutely love, aspects of work that are less desirable, or perhaps most importantly, the benefits of making money.

As a facilitator who has worked at Emily Carr University of Art and Design and now the University of Victoria, I've worked with students who have reached a number of career milestones and have seen how each opportunity has helped them pave way to the next.



For students who choose to work and study simultaneously, it is exciting to watch them grow and develop into their respective roles, build relationships with their coworkers, and to gain a clear vision for 'what's next'. Most importantly, I have had the opportunity to witness how various aspects of their education, employment, extracurriculars, and personal passions come together to help them develop a sense of who they are and how they fit into this world.

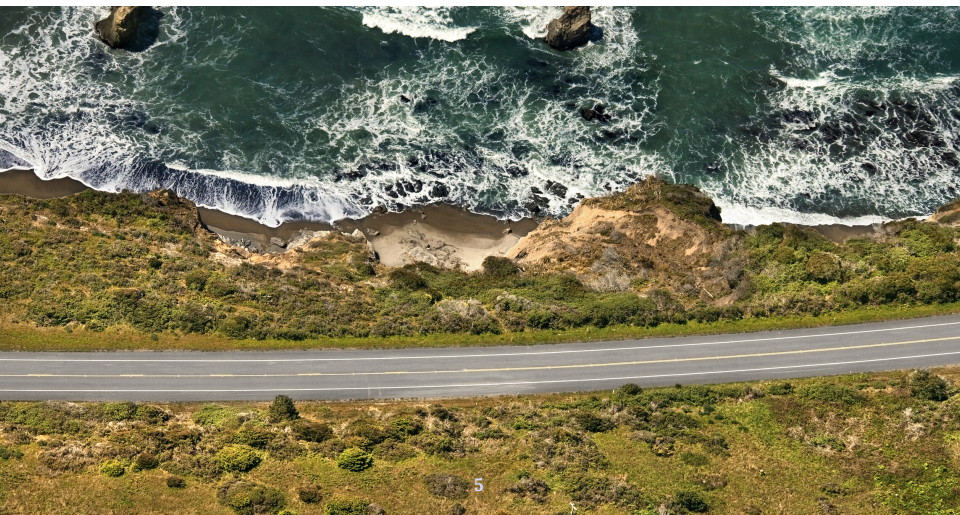
Every time I connect with a new employer, I am amazed at the creativity and thoughtfulness they bring to the table.

Customized employment takes a lot of thinking outside the box and unlearning everything we thought we knew about people with developmental disabilities. All of the employers that I have had the pleasure of working with have been able to think outside the box and assume responsibility fostering community in the workplace with finesse.

The ways in which we approach customizing a valuable role for a student can vary. I have worked with employers to modify existing roles or to create something completely new in order to match the student's strengths and skills with the needs of the organization. I have come to understand that customized employment is a lot like finding the right piece to match the puzzle and this is a metaphor I often use to describe customized employment to potential employers. Albeit, there is a lot of time and consideration that goes into crafting each role for a student, the magic of it is watching everything fall into place as students begin work. The excitement that comes with starting a new job, learning about the work, and meeting new people.

I've quickly learned that the actual work is a small part of the greater picture. As students immerse themselves in their work, they come to understand things they like and dislike about the job and get a better sense of where they would like to go next. They meet people who introduce them to new things such as a fun hobby or a great place to grab a beer. They build positive relationships with their co-workers and hopefully make a few friends along the way.

Although working with each employer is different, the results are much the same. Through meaningful employment, students strengthen their sense of identity and become confident in the decisions they make. As valuable members of the workforce, they reap the benefits of having a sense of belonging and community. With each new opportunity, collaboratively crafted by employers and facilitators, countless possibilities open up for the future. It is our experiences in the present that help to set us up for what comes ahead in this journey called life.





# CUSTOMIZED EMPLOYMENT: IN REAL LIFE

“An approach that targets the uniqueness of each individual”

By Lisa DeWinter

Lisa has been facilitating inclusion at NVIT since 2011. She is a mother, a volunteer and most recently a masters student, often powered by Tim Hortons coffee. In her precious spare time she enjoys spending time with her family and friends, playing baseball and stepping away from technology. Lisa's favourite downtime activity is listening to the sound of rain by the warmth of a fire.

*A successful graduate of the Associate of Arts-First Nations Studies program at the Nicola Valley Institute of Technology was determined to find exciting and fulfilling work after completing her studies. This graduate's dedication and willpower landed her a position at Merritt's very own Kekuli Café Coffee & Bannock that was customized thoughtfully to highlight her strengths and maximize her contributions to this local business.*

Kekuli Café has acquired a reputation for providing an authentic dining experience like no other, serving their amazing indigenous cuisine, and providing a warm and friendly environment. This community engaged business supports local talent during their “open mic night” in addition to housing various local artistic pieces throughout their interior. These unique elements captured the heart of the graduate who described to me, “How much this felt like home for her.”

A match was discovered, an application form was completed, a resume and cover letter were handed in and lastly, an interview was scheduled and completed.

Through a collaborative approach that focussed on the skills, knowledge and interests of the job seeker, while discussing and meeting the needs of the employer, a position was customized and this NVIT Alumni was hired for one to two shifts per week as a customer service associate.

As a new employee of Kekuli Café Coffee & Bannock her responsibilities included, maintaining a clean and safe environment for customers and staff, restocking and keeping the coffee bar area clean, clearing and cleaning dishes, welcoming and being mindful of customers' needs and lastly working with staff to ensure all closing duties are complete. Although she is new to her position, her goal is to work towards becoming a floor hostess.

In order to gain some insight into what creating a customized employment opportunity was like, from the perspective of an employer, I sat down with Elijah to pick his brain about his experience:

**Lisa: What was your first impression when I approached you about customized employment?**

**Elijah:** “My initial thought was that I get to give someone an opportunity that I was never given and this really touched home for me. Because of the way I cared, the way I looked, and the way I talked, I was singled out and bullied for a long time and because of this it took a long time for me to understand how important it is to have a sense of belonging and how crucial this is to our development and well-being as we become adults... I understood that equity must be established before equality can be obtained and I was excited to be a part of this social change.”

**Lisa:** *What were the barriers that first came to mind?*

**Elijah:** “Owning your own business, you must consider the risks, for example labor cost or performance outcomes; however, after discussing how the collaborative approach works and taking the time to understand the process and supports that are put in place for the job seeker, myself, and my staff, I honestly couldn’t be happier and I began to envision what an opportunity like this will bring to the job seeker, staff and our community.”

**Lisa:** *How did you work through the barriers and what supports were helpful?*

**Elijah:** “I felt the job coaching provided insight about diversity that could have been missed otherwise and not with just me, but with staff and even customers. But mostly, the job coaching provided an inclusive and intentional support approach that was balanced in every which way especially



during the training process and even as the facilitator transitioned out of the job coach role. An excellent example of how we worked through a barrier was when a book of visual aids was created by the facilitator and the job seeker to help with training. We saw this as a helpful tool for all new hires and look forward to incorporating it into our training”.

**Lisa:** *From this alternative approach to hiring, in what ways were you able to minimize difference and what would you share about customized employment?*

**Elijah:** “The best part about this approach is that there was a mutual understanding between the STEPS Forward facilitator and myself that every person has the potential to be someone and go somewhere and that a person can grow and excel by believing that the possibilities are endless. And what reflects this type of thinking is to focus less on what’s different about one person and more on how my roles and responsibilities might not allow for diversity within the work environment.

This alternative approach allowed my staff and I to collaboratively create meaningful employment that fit this individual's skills and interests. And to achieve meaningful employment it was important to keep the hiring process intact, create a job description that matched the skills and interests of the job seeker, provide proper training, and be mindful when setting up or communicating about staff meetings and staff functions. When you minimize difference, everyone is on the same page and my amazing staff all took the initiative to support and help train their new co-worker and by simply role modelling what they do every shift they were also reinforcing her training.

The experience and opportunity to work with Elijah speaks to the impact of being around innovative people and demonstrates the possibilities that are out there in community for students and alumni when we pay attention to the right match. As an Inclusion Facilitator, it was very important to see how the authentic post-secondary experience prepared this alumni to identify and secure work that is meaningful, and how meaningful inclusion has the power to raise expectations about what life can look like in our community. It was exciting to work collaboratively with Elijah and his staff who all contributed to helping create a sense of belonging within the organization. What I took away from the interview was insight into owning a small business in a small community and an appreciation of how Elijah's passion for inclusion and building a sense of belonging made this opportunity possible.

Creating social change requires us to have faith in what is possible, and I am humbled to have been in the presence of the innovative people at Kekuli Cafe.



## JUDITH MOSOFF SCHOLARSHIP

The Judith Mosoff scholarship recognizes high school students who are fully included in high-school and who plan to pursue an inclusive and coherent post-secondary education after graduation. Applicants are asked to describe how they are working towards this goal through inclusive academic and extracurricular opportunities in their school and through contributions to their community. School and community references are asked to describe how they are promoting inclusion through their work. Award recipients are acknowledged at their high school graduation ceremony. For more information visit:

[www.bc-ipse.org/judith-mosoff-scholarship-fund.html](http://www.bc-ipse.org/judith-mosoff-scholarship-fund.html)