**Employment Insights with the NRTC – Episode 1**

Opening music

Introduction: Hello, welcome to Employment Insights with the NRTC. On each episode, we invite a guest over to talk about their challenges, achievements, and insights through employment. On this episode, we are joined by host Sylvia Stinson-Perez and guest Joe Roan. Keep listening to hear how, through courage and persistence, Joe found his success through employment.

Sylvia: Hello, everyone, welcome to NRTC Employment Insights. Today I am just thrilled to be joined by a friend, Joe Roan. I got to know Joe through my participation in Toastmasters, which is a public speaking training program. Welcome, Joe.

Joe: Hello. Nice to see you again, Sylvia. Great to be here.

Sylvia: Great to have you. So, Joe, working and maintaining employment through vision loss is a challenge. Tell us a little bit about yourself and your vision loss journey.

Joe: I have had two different lives. One was very early and one was a long span of unemployment. Let me tell you about both of them.

The first one really was out of college. I left college a little early. It wasn't quite the thing for me. I had to look around and say, what if not college? I had a sister who was doing something in Massachusetts called the Vending Facilities program. Today, it's known as Business Enterprise Program. She was actually pretty well ensconced in that. She had been doing it three or four years and I really had no better ideas. I really didn't. I had no real knowledge of the program, but I had to have some direction. So I signed up. I went through three months of on the job training. They may do it differently these days. And in many states, I would say Massachusetts, at least at the time I entered the program, was one of the more independently run programs.

What I mean by that is they gave my vendor quite a bit of latitude as to how they run their business. Once you went through training, at some point you were awarded a location, which could be anything from a newsstand to a coffee shop to a full cafeteria, assuming you had the proper training. If you had trained at a newsstand, they wouldn't give you a cafeteria. Once you got that, they furnished you with the proper equipment, working condition and about a week's worth of stock. And they let you go off and running. Of course, the program was mostly based on seniority, longevity, the first store on stand or facility that you got wasn't going to be the top of the heap.

Over the years, I had five different locations in Massachusetts. I did this over a course of about twenty-two years. And by the end, I was making pretty good money and I call myself an independent businessman because for all intents and purposes, that's exactly what I was. It was a great twenty-two years, not without its frustrations like anything. I went through a lot of changes during those twenty-two years, of course. I had always had low vision, was always legally blind, and but during those twenty-two years, about seven or eight years into my program, I lost quite a bit width of sight. I became white cane dependent. And it was quite traumatic and anybody who might be listening they probably have gone through something similar. I nearly quit doing vending at that point because my whole life was just upside down. But I honestly had no other place to turn. And I just decided I'm going to do this until I can figure out something else. Well, that only lasted another 15 years, but it was a good 15 years. It really was. I thought my experience as a vendor gave me true independent and critical thinking skills that I may not have gotten as an employee for somebody. When you have to make your own decisions about what you're going to buy, what equipment should I try to use or not use, what merchandise should I sell? Who should I hire or who might I have to fire? Those are important decisions, especially with the last category. Over my career I probably hired and fired over 30 people. And those are probably some of the most difficult decisions I made, but you learned a lot about yourself and you learned a lot about doing those kind of activities. Not to mention running around, running your own business, dealing with a lot of cash, it’s cash business. There's a lot of responsibility, a lot of bookkeeping, taxes, things of that nature. It was a responsibility as a 19-year-old when I first entered, I probably wasn't quite ready for, but I grew into it and after 22 years, I thought this career has been good to me. It really had been. I went on to other things. Because at the time, you can stop me any time here, that was the first half of my working career. It really was a good foundation for the rest of my adult life.

Sylvia: Well, share the rest! Yes. Share the rest. Even talk about the time you maybe were not working and what you did.

Joe: That was the second half of my adult life.

Sylvia: Yeah.

Joe: My wife in the late 90s had an opportunity to move from Massachusetts at her company to Florida. Not secretly, not so secretly, I had wished and hoped to live in Florida for about 10 years at this juncture. I had no way of making this dream come true. But when presented with her opportunity to move to Florida, I was so tickled at the possibilities. I was making okay money with vending, but something sort of weird had happened in the mid-90s. In fact, it was a catastrophe. In Oklahoma City, the Murrah Federal Building was bombed. It caused a wave across the country the way they treated security. My facility was located in a federal building. As a result of the tightened down security, the building went. The building I worked in took up a whole city block, had about six entrances. People would walk through the building on their way to the next street. After that Oklahoma City bombing, everything was locked down one way in and one way out. And I lost probably about 40 percent of my business. Still survivable, but put that together with my wife's opportunity and I said, oh, take a chance. And I did.

I thought I could make a transition to a tech career. I was sort of a techie all my adult life. I took college courses, had my own computer. I even made the transition when I lost sight and when things like Windows came along to move from using large print to using Jaws screen reader, which was quite a transition in and of itself. I was pretty good at tech or at least I thought I was. Self-trained and took some courses and got what I thought was pretty adequate credentials to make a transition to a tech career that was over the first three or four or five years when I was in Florida. I hit the streets. Put out over 150 resumes, never one interview. Very, very frustrated.

At that point, I said, if someone's not going to hire me, I'm going to go back to what I know. I'm going to hire myself. I had already had twenty-two years as a sole proprietor, self-employed. I can do it again. I tried many things, including internships, volunteers. I, as a tech person, I thought I could or maybe help some people with malware on the computers. I thought I could run my own website and sell things, affiliate sales, things like that. I thought I could day trade.

All these ideas I had tried. None of them really panned out. I ended up volunteering at the local lighthouse, that's where I met you, Sylvia. I also tried volunteering at a local college, trying to help them with their website. I volunteered at the local county to do the same thing. A lot of these things, when I say volunteer, I didn't mean it. I went to my local county in Florida. And volunteered for over two years. This is after I had my training as a tech person, I was trained as a database administrator and a Web site developer. I thought I had pretty high credentials. I went to this county commissioner’s office and they had an IT department. I asked if they could have any room for an internship or even volunteer-ship, and they said, that's great. Can you teach us how we can make our websites accessible to the disabled? I said of course I can.

I knew nothing, nothing about it. But I said, this is my foot in the door. I left there about two years. This is 40 hours a week, zero pay. I thought I gave them everything they asked for and they gave me nothing I asked for. It was very frustrating what we had. So, I listed about five or six or seven things during an 18-year, 19-year period where I earned zero dollars. I was lucky to have my wife, who was making a good living to support me. It was, but it really got to the point at the end of this 18 or 19 years, I kind of threw my hands up and said, I don't know what is left. I was just out applying for a part time job, even almost anything, anything I could possibly do. But the straw that broke the camel's back with me, which was to file a give up moment, was when I applied for a part time weekend position mining the Salvation Army trailer where people could drop off bags of clothes. And I didn't even get that job because the woman was questioning like, how could I do this possibly if I'm blind? I was insulted, but I answered the best I could. I was certainly qualified to do that. It was a real frustrating moment, a real low point. I decided at that point.

Sylvia: Yeah, that’s frustrating.

Joe: Yeah, I decided at that point I'm just going to take care of my health and myself, which I did. And plenty as it seems, poetic. A year went by, took care of my health, I lost a lot of weight. And the day I reached my goal of weight loss, I got a call for an interview. That interview turns into the job I have today and this is going to kill you, Sylvia. The job I have today is fixing websites for over thirty-five states’ unemployment sites. So, the guy who couldn't get a job like 18 years is now helping disabled people by way of making the websites easier to navigate.

Sylvia: That's awesome.

Joe: I thought it was a great story.

Sylvia: It is awesome. So, Joe, that reminds me of a Dale Carnegie quote. He said, “If action breeds doubt and fear, action breeds confidence and courage. If you want to conquer fear, do not sit at home and think about it. Go out and get busy.” And it sounds like for the most part of that journey, you really did stay busy. It sounds like there were a few times where you were like frustrated and I would say angry and disappointed. But you kept going.

Joe: All true. All true.

Sylvia: So, absolutely. What major lesson have you learned when you're trying something new or taking a new job, whatever that is? What's the what's the lesson you've learned?

Joe: Don't give up. Keep going. Keep going. It doesn't matter what you do. Keep going. That is as simple as that. I wish I had a great quote. There is a portion of a Winston Churchill speech in 1941, but he ends that speech by pounding table saying, “Never give up, never give up, never, never give up.” I don't know. I wish I remember the whole speech, but I heard the body of that speech and he was so full of passion. It inspired me.

Sylvia: Yeah absolutely. And you know so another Eleanor Roosevelt quote that comes to mind for me and that, I think epitomizes what you just said, is that you know you could have felt like inferior and like worthless. And she said, “No one can make you feel inferior without your consent.” And you did not allow anybody, even though you had all of those what people might term as rejections You just kept going. So, go ahead.

Joe: I never felt inferior, to be honest with you. Now, that is probably, I can't even tell you why, except for one thing. When I was a young boy in even elementary school, I was singled out with a few other students to take part in a special class which indulged, we got in that we were able to leave our own class once a week and spend the whole day with some advanced students. And we did things like science experiments and read Shakespeare and open up US News and World Report. We're in the fifth grade and we’re doing these things. So, I knew I had some wherewithal. But I also knew that the world has a bias against visually impaired and blind. I said I'm not going to let them dictate how I feel. I knew what I was capable of. As long as things could be made accessible and technology, somehow, I was always a techie sort of guy even as a young boy doing science experiments.

When computers came along, I dove right into that, just for fun. It turned out to be my salvation, Sylvia. And whenever people ask me how do I do it, I say, well, I'll be honest with you. If I was in a third world country, I don't know how I'd do it either, because technology really has been the answer for me.

Sylvia: So, my next question for you is what are the key blindness skills that have led to your success? So, technology is right up there at the top of your list, but are there any others that you think these are the things that lead to personal and professional success as a person who's blind?

Joe: I surely think assertiveness has to be there, and I don't think that happens by accident or by chance. It only happens by having some initial courage to do what's outside your comfort zone. Many people go to special schools that help you learn the skills you need as a blind person, daily living skills and such. Or they might go to a special summer camp that helps you do the things you might not do otherwise, and you do with other blind people. And you can learn from that. I never really got that opportunity particularly. But what is really unique about me and my family is I am one of seven siblings, six of whom are legally blind. So, we just had a natural environment in our growing up everyday home life that didn't let you feel sorry for yourself or feel inadequate. We all were, you know, similarly disabled, if I could use that word, sight impaired. There was no crying on anybody's shoulder. Everybody just sort of teamed up together and said we’ll figure out a way or they're not going to let you get away with boo-hooing. That was my natural environment. But I do think if you don't have that natural environment, finding some people in similar positions for at least moral support, but honestly, to learn from is really, if you can find that opportunity, that would be a real way to gain some advantage gain some confidence. Once you have a little confidence, don't be afraid to assert yourself. And I have never been afraid to assert myself ever.

Sylvia: So, some of the things just to recap that you're saying are assertiveness, confidence, problem-solving, a willingness to learn, a willingness to ask for help, seeking out mentors, volunteering. And those are some of the I guess we would call those soft skills

Joe: Sure.

Sylvia: That you definitely have. So, what are some of the key blindness skills? So, I know technology. What else for you?

Joe: We never went to a school for blind or visually impaired. We went to a normal public school. Once a week somebody from the state agency would come in and sort of check up on us, ask our teachers this and that. It was not when I went to school, there wasn't a whole lot, except these big fat pieces of chalk that were five times the size of-.

Sylvia: It was a long time ago, Joe.

Joe: The teachers could do nothing except maybe rewrite some of the copy that they had in larger print. And there was some teachers that were good at it and there was some teachers that really didn't care. I hate to put it like that. But that's the truth. They didn't care or didn't understand, one or the other. What I did learn was, listen close, because that's all you've got. I couldn't even take notes in my own notebook because I couldn't read my own handwriting was so crummy. So, I really had to learn to listen. I don't know how you develop those skills, except necessity is the mother of invention. And that really became one of my best skills. It's funny that we talked about Toastmasters briefly. That's one of the biggest skills in learning Toastmasters. More than speaking, you learn how to listen.

Sylvia: Absolutely. So you're bringing up Toastmasters. And public speaking is one of the things people fear the most, but it's one of the most confidence building activities that you can engage in. I know you're an excellent public speaker. You're very involved in public speaking training. How do you feel your involvement in activities like Toastmasters and other things, because you're out there in the community, how do you feel those have really enhanced your opportunities and your success level?

Joe: The first time I ever attended a Toastmasters meeting, I was a guest. And I'm asked at the end of the meeting what did you think? And I was asked to comment. So I stood up and said, I'm not afraid of almost anything. I'll say almost anything to anybody. But the way you people do here is very impressive and I’m a little bit intimidated. Just there's a portion of every Toastmasters meeting where you get a chance to speak off the top of your head. It’s called tabletop. If you are familiar with it, you’re asked the question and it's as if a situation came up where the local TV stations down the street for some big thing and they stick a camera in your face. How will you answer without looking like a fool when you get to practice those kinds of situations every week at a Toastmasters meeting, you can't help but get better at it just through osmosis, I think that is.

But there's also some skills when we do organize speeches in Toastmasters, we do have to plan it out. We don't just get up and rattle off whatever's on our mind. We do have some structure and there is some storytelling that goes on and you want to do it effectively. I think those specific skills you can learn in Toastmasters are invaluable because not only did they give you a chance to improve your public speaking, they improve your critical thinking. When you get to help others, they improve your leadership. When you get help from others, they improve your appreciation for that too. Many things. And it's all done in a very supportive environment.

Sylvia: So, I think you've also had a lot of fun, and I think sometimes we miss out when we hide ourselves away and we don't get out there when we think about how many people are not working, they're missing out on that water cooler fun or these kind of things that Joe Namath said something I love. And it says, “When you have confidence, you can have a lot of fun. And when you to have fun. You can do amazing things.” And I think you have demonstrated that

well, Joe.

Joe: I appreciate the compliments Sylvia, it's true. I never joined Toastmasters to improve my public speaking. I only joined to have the social activity. I enjoyed the time before and after the meetings to have one on one conversations. I’ve made some great friends in Toastmasters

Sylvia: and you've had a lot of opportunities to do other speaking and writing.

Joe: Yes, I have. In fact, in my current position, I've had to do a couple of presentations. I never would have been able to without the Toastmasters training. So, it really is important.

Sylvia: So, share with us one insight about your employment journey. Just one insight that you want everybody to know.

Joe: Perseverance in one word, perseverance that involves tenacity don't give up. That involves patience, because sometimes it doesn't matter what you do, it's not going to help.

Tenacity and patience, it also involves perspective. I have a saying, if you want to quote,

I'm going to give you one of my home worlds. This is my own creation because I'm often asked as I get a lot of blind people and they are asked, how do you do it? As if it was some superhuman skill that no other worldly person could have. I answer them this way. I said today you might win the lottery or you might lose a limb. After all, there’s always going to be people better off than you and there’s always made people worse off than you. Excuse me, balance and perspective. So, no matter how tough things get, well, take a little rest and go at it again tomorrow because there's someone worse off than you. I guarantee you that a lot of people

worse off than you and it gives you appreciation for what you do have. It's very simple, it's a

spiritual thing, of course. I think it helps me.

Sylvia: and you have definitely demonstrated that perseverance and that patience, just the thought of 18 years of trying and keeping going, I think a lot of people would give up and have given up. And so, I think I would just read another quote that I love from Roger Staubach that I think really fits this, “confidence comes from hours and days and weeks and years of constant work and dedication.” And you have demonstrated that, Joe, and I thank you for that.

Joe: Thank you very much.

Sylvia: Excellent. And it is so true that living with vision loss, and especially thinking about that employment journey requires an amazing amount of perseverance.

Joe: if I could say one more thing about that. It doesn't matter if you get what you want, get something. I have a brother right now working for a local lighthouse. As a matter of fact, it wasn't what he was looking to do, but it’s a job. After about 90 days on the job, he discovered that there may be a new position opening up. And he's doing very well at his current position that he may have a chance at the new position. And I don't think anybody's crystal ball is good enough to know the future. So take what you can get. Keep looking towards the future and keep on keeping on.

Sylvia: You know, Joe, that brings me back to my very beginnings of my career. And I took a job that absolutely wasn't what I wanted, what I “ thought I deserved” with my master's degree. But I needed a job. I wanted a job. And yet now here, all these years later, I built an amazing career out of that and found passion for it.

Joe: This networking, in a way you'll never get that job you want by staying in the house. Hey Sylvia can I let you in on a secret. So I joined Toastmasters sort of to schmooze with the local CEO of the local lighthouse, thinking it might help me. It didn't quite work that way, but I got a great feeling. I'm glad you’re my friend Sylvia.

Sylvia: Well, thank you, Joe, for your tremendous employment insights. You have been a pleasure to have. And your confidence, I think, just comes through loud and clear, but also your messages about perseverance and patience and getting out there and making something happen for you. So thank you so much, Joe.

Joe: Glad to have been here.