**Employment Insights with the NRTC – Episode 2**

Opening music

Introduction: Welcome back to Employment Insights with the NRTC. On each episode we invited guests to join us and talk about their employment journey with vision loss. On this episode, we are joined by host, Sylvia Stinson-Perez, and guest, Stephen Podley. Keep listening to hear about how Stephen's success, leadership, and challenges in the workplace led him to where he works today.

Sylvia: Welcome to NRTC Employment Insights. Today I am just thrilled to be joined by a very long-time friend, Stephen Podley. I think I've known Stephen over 20 years, and it might be closer to 25. He inspires me and I know he's going to share some terrific insights that will help you on your employment journey. Welcome, Stephen.

Stephen: Well, thank you. I appreciate it. And I'm also very glad to be here. And it's a thrill for me to be having this conversation with you, Sylvia. And when you started telling me about how many years it's been, now I understand why my knees hurt sometimes when I get out of bed.

Sylvia: We are getting older. So, Steven and I go back to when we started an RP support group. So, tell us about your employment and vision loss journey. You've had a very successful career but tell us about that journey.

Stephen: Well, it started off with, you know, I went to college and then after college I decided, well, I probably should get a job if I want to get married. That's a good thing. And so, at that point of time, I was legally blind, but I have RP. And so, I had enough vision to where I felt like I could drive a car, but I did not because I didn't want to hurt anybody else. But that was kind of just to give you an idea what it was like. So, I started a job and I didn't tell my employers that maybe 30 years from now I'm going to be blind because I figured I wouldn’t be working there 30 years from now anyhow. But eventually after that, my first job after college, I worked very hard. It was how I was raised to have a strong work ethic. And I just wanted to do the best thing. And also, the harder I worked and the more I concentrated at work, the day went by faster. And then hey it’s five o'clock time to go home. So, I just always tried my hardest. I was always told, you know, if you try your hardest, there's nothing you can't overcome. And that's how to be successful. So anyway, that's how I was raised. And so, at this job, after I had been there about a year or so, I told them how in the future I'm going to go blind one day. I told that to my manager and the manager of human resources, and I didn't know how they were going to take it. And they were like, Stephen, if you ever go blind and you're still here, we will do everything we can do to accommodate you. We will never want to miss you. We want you to be here if you want to work here. And then I thought to myself, well, I didn't say it out loud, but I'm thinking this could be something that they're just saying to make me feel good. They might not mean it and I'll never really know.

So anyway, I took a promotion. I left. I went to a different company. They called me back about two years later and they said they knew the reason I left was to make more money. And so anyway, they told me that they've got another opening that pays even more, and they wanted to know if I'd come back. These are the same people, including the H.R. manager, and I did go back for another few years. But the point is that you have people in this in this world who they know you're going to go blind, and they'll still do, you know, everything they can do because they want you working for them, and they believe in you, and they trust you. And I will say that I was raised where boys don't ever cry for any reason, they do not cry. And that day when they told me that and they offered me to come back, I teared up a little bit because I knew it was sincere, even though I was going blind, that this group of people would still take me back.

Then there was a time that I went for an interview. That was before I had left the second time. And then I thought, I just want to be honest with these people up front, let them know. So, I told them. And the result is they, they took the job offer back. And then I've had employers at the, I can't say where, but I had supervisors who knew I was blind and told me their best employee that they've ever had working for me. And I've had other employers that told me that they asked me, do you think you could still do the job because you're blind? I said, I know I can. And they said, well, I don't think so. I'm giving you three months to leave. So, I've had this mix of people and that's just the way it is out there. Sometimes people will believe in you, and they've got your back. And then you have other people who are harsh, cruel people, and you got to make it through the work environment by just doing your best and trying to overcome these biases that some of these managers have.

Sylvia: Disclosure of disability is a huge topic for people. Counselors working in services for the blind often don't know what to tell their clients. Individuals experiencing vision loss don't know if they should disclose at the interview, when offered a position, of what should they do? It is a very hard thing. And so, you're sharing, Stephen, that it almost doesn't matter because there will be people who will be fine with you and people who will not. I will tell you that, is to disclose, because that's the authentic thing to do. And I don't know that I would want to work for someone who didn't value me at the end of the day and all the great things you bring to the job. I think we fear failure. We try to avoid it. But I don't, wouldn’t you agree that failure often also precedes success? What do you think, Stephen?

Stephen: Oh, definitely, if you're open minded and which I would say most of my life, I would describe myself as being open minded. So, I like to say that when I make a mistake and everybody does, when I make a mistake, I want to grow and be better after I make that mistake and I want to learn how I made it and figure out how not to make it again in the future. And that will make you a better and a stronger person. But you have to be open minded and realize that the more you know, the more you realize you don't know anything else.

Sylvia: Winston Churchill has a great quote that said, “Success is not final. Failure is not fatal. It's the courage to continue that counts.” And that fits right with what you were saying.

Stephen: Absolutely. Absolutely.

Sylvia: So, Stephen, tell us about one pivotal experience in which you failed or thought you would fail, but used that to learn and grow.

Stephen: OK, I have only one thing that I disagree with that you mentioned. And I'll just say the disclosure part of it. In my field where I'm at, I don't think people would have been as open minded in the beginning to offer me the job if I would have told them, by the way, I'm going to be blind. Whereas if I got a chance to go there and prove myself, I'm not saying that it wouldn't happen, I just think that statistically I have more options available if I was to not say anything, go in there and prove myself that I can be the best employee you've got and not see a thing. But I got to get a chance to prove it first.

Sylvia: From what I know about you, is that you had some very good residual vision.

Stephen: I did, I did.

Sylvia: Yes.

Stephen: And so, you know, it depends on where I was at, but there was some things, some funny stories like, you know, they would want me to go and walk. And then it’s a construction site and I shredded a brand-new suit, because I couldn’t see all these things I was colliding into and they were probably wondering what's up with this guy. But, you know, I had many, many times things like that happened as I was trying to, but I still had enough to where I could take lumps and bruises and get through it. And people would wonder, but I was at least able to get in there and show that, hey, I can do this job. And so there was a time that that I did disclose, I mentioned about how I told the employer that I was going to be blind. And I also mentioned about how I never tear up or I never cry or whatever. That might have been the only time I remember crying by myself when they took the job offer back when I told them that. And I know for sure I could do the job, like with my hands tied behind my back, but they wouldn't give me the chance. I thought, wow, now I know what it feels like to be discriminated against, anybody that gets discriminated for any reason. I was like, now I really know. And it hurts. It hurts. I went and talked to somebody who became a dear friend that that worked in the ADA. And she told me, well, why do you feel like you need to disclose it? I was like, because I just feel like it's the honest thing that I should do it. And she was like, well, you don't have to. And then I said, well, the next one, I decided I wouldn’t, and I got an opportunity, but, but that's the only thing I would disagree with. And hey, I'm not saying that you're wrong. I hope you don't take it that way. But I feel that I learned based upon where I was at, that I felt like I needed a chance to prove myself. And then when I was given a chance to prove myself, I was able to flourish.

Sylvia: So, what I should say is if it impacts any part of your job. I've never been in a place where vision would not have impacted a part of my job, and I think that most people don't really acknowledge that in many jobs it will impact. And so, you were able to know that it wouldn't impact your ability to do your job in any way.

Stephen: That's true.

Sylvia: And that, that is probably how I should clarify that, is that that really matters.

Stephen: Yeah. And, and a lot of things can be accommodated, too, if you know you can or at least you think you can. You try hard enough.

Sylvia: You can figure out. Right. You can figure out accommodations.

Stephen: Right. Right. Yeah.

Sylvia: So, Stephen, what major lesson or lessons have you learned when you're trying something new, like maybe taking a new job or a promotion or just doing something different at that job?

Stephen: I've learned that we were all created with different strengths and weaknesses and that some people will achieve greatness in a certain area, but not another. But most jobs that are out there don't require just one skill. It's you usually must have a multiple skill set and not everybody is out there, that's going to be just a go getter, perfect score in every single skill category. Those people really don't exist. So, most people feel insecure about their abilities, especially when trying a new job. And I learned that if you just try as hard as you can try that there's no mountain you can't climb, there's nothing you can't get over. I don't want to just be a cliché and say it requires hard work. But for instance, there was a job that the first day I'm like, OK, what would you like me to do? They came in with a stack of books and manuals that would have reached if they could pile them up on top of each other, able to reach the ceiling. They were like, OK, start with this, read all these, understand that, try to memorize all of it and then come back to me. I don't know, I guess you'd have to be in my position to understand and then look back and see the humor in it, but I looked at that stack of manuals and I was like, wow, this is how you people say you eat an elephant one bite at a time. I was like, good God, I don't remember that many books in college. But basically, if you try and, you know, it seemed insurmountable. But just like that saying goes you eat an elephant one bite at a time. And you just have to do, you know, one at a time. And then I take it home, try to understand it, talk to people. You know, you do whatever you can do to accommodate yourself too if you need more time because your vision's not as good like mine, then I would take some home. I would read it, I'd scan it. Because my eyes would get tired, you know, I did have the vision then where I could read, but it was tiring. So, I just tried to do as much, let the computer do as much of that as possible of the reading.

Sylvia: That's excellent.

Stephen: I hope that answered the question.

Sylvia: That was excellent, and I should say that you are in a very highly technical skilled kind of profession. So, you needed to read those manuals because it matters. So, what are the key blindness skills that you have found have led to your success and that everybody really, really needs?

Stephen: OK, that's a great question. I'd love to share my thoughts and ideas. I'll preface it by saying that I think in all of history, if you were going to have to be blind or you were born blind or going blind, this is the time to do it. You know, this is better, I think, then any of the times in the past, because we have so much technology that's out there that people before us didn’t. And I'll never forget being introduced to, I guess I could say iPhone. I hate to say that on the podcast and put one phone over another. But for blind people, at least at the time that that I got one, they helped blind people very much. I can remember it was a federal agent that told me that he was blind on the phone and he strongly recommended me get one. It's amazing. So, I was like, OK. And so, I got the phone and I am I'm going to trying not to go out on a tangent. But basically the smartphone nowadays it’s got so many features to it that we used to have to carry gadgets around, fill in our pockets full of voice recorders and compasses, talking things and things that would beep and blip if you were going to, you know, distance meters and all sorts of things in the past to try to get yourself lined up. And you can do all that on an iPhone that's in your pocket. And plus, so much better. Not just them, but I'm sure other androids, too. But they can do so much more. So, I've had people tell me recently that I know how to use a phone better than they can and they can see and I'm giving you an example. I'll walk across a parking lot and know exactly how to get there, because I'm going to use some of the features that are on the phone. You know I’ll use different GPS, compasses, just a variety of things. But the phones have just so much to offer. Business wise you may also wonder how that helps. Well, you know, you do text messages, emails, all your different email accounts, phone calls, basically anything that any sighted person can do with their. You can do too. And sometimes we can do it faster. And it's a handheld computer is all that the telephone is nowadays. You know, it's a computer that's small and you can talk into it, make a phone call. And so, it's like having a desktop or a laptop, too, which is the only thing we had back before these smartphones, which is another technology that that really helped me to achieve in my career, which is using adaptive technologies and screen readers like JAWS, for instance. And now with the Mac voice over. I hope that answered the question or if you have any follow up.

Sylvia: Yeah, great. What about getting around using mobility training, cane, using the bus, et cetera? Because I know you've been a bus user for a long time too.

Stephen: Yes. The only thing I can't do is drive one now, but I pretty much, know how to get around, mostly I will take public transportation. So, I'll walk, I'll take the the bus, take the train, take multiple trains, multiple buses, and then occasionally it will take shared transportation services. I have Uber and Lyft on my phone. Or sometimes I might take a train to a certain area and then there's no easy way to walk or take other buses or whatever. And I might Uber the rest of the trip for a half a mile or mile or whatever. So, combination of everything. Sometimes I'll ask someone to drive me, but most of the time I do everything on my own. And how do I do it? I mentioned, you know, you have these apps for shared transportation service or special transportation service, sorry. I've got transit apps that tell me wherever I'm standing with the GPS, it'll tell me, oh, this is the next bus coming and what time when the next one is coming. I don't have to do anything but turn it on. I've got apps that are artificial intelligence that will describe to me whatever the computer sees. I've got apps that will link me to other people that will describe things to me. It's amazing what you can do, and how they'll help you not just get around, but help you to do your job.

Sylvia: Well, Stephen, I happen to know that you have always been really techie. And so thinking about hobbies, how have hobbies, you know, been a big part of your success. And I think about going to your home back in the 90s and you have this room full of all these cool ping pong machines that you literally did all the electric work on. How have hobbies really helped you with your level of skill development as a person who's blind for just enjoyment of life and personal and professional development?

Stephen: OK, so that's a great question and yes, I do love pinball machines, I no longer can play them at all, unfortunately, because I lost that last megapixel that I have in my vision. But I played that pinball machine until I had that last megapixel. In fact, I played it with no vision at all, just trying to hit the flippers and listening to the sound of the ball going down. But it wasn't too fun. But I do love pinball machines and would love to just trace wires and try to figure out where electrical shorts were or different components that were broken. Either repair them, swap them out. I was fascinated when I opened one up and there were so many wires in there. I don't know if I did. Did I show you the wires back then? It just looked like there were millions of wires underneath all of them. I don't know, just something like that just thrilled me.

Sylvia: That would just stress me out. Listen, when I get my two headphones tangled up it stress me out.

Stephen: I'll tell you, another hobby I have is I do love, absolutely love to, and this was right now with no vision, to play musical instruments, write,

write songs, write my own songs and record them. And so, I'm able to do all that with no help whatsoever. And I'm saying that because any blind person could do that, and those are the hobbies that I've had and I've have had. But my hobby was, I still have some, by the way, and still repair them, mostly by myself. I might have to ask somebody to tell me what color is this wire or whatever, but I can't play them, but I still enjoy them. I consider those hobbies a type of discipline. And just like martial arts or painting, any musical instrument, whatever you're into, you can do most anything blind. You might have to do it a little different, but you can do pretty much anything.

I think that whatever you get into as an art or a discipline is great for many things. I think that it helps you to focus better, which also helps in the workplace. I think it teaches you how to, that's why they call it a discipline, I think it does discipline you to where you have to practice it. Practice makes perfect. That type of thing. So, I just think whether it's martial arts or whatever you do, if you try to be better at it, you will be. And I remember reading the book about the Beatles, very popular band a while ago, and they said different band members talked about how horrible they were until they played together about ten thousand hours. They were just atrocious. But yet they're considered to be possibly the best band that ever came up. And so, it's just that story that they just kept doing it. And that's great for them wanting to be a band. But why and how would that impact employment? So, in my life, I just feel like it helped me with problem solving abilities. You know, if you don't use it, you lose it. And so, I think that it helps strengthen your mind in different areas, such as logic, problem solving, sticking with something, trying, going around and finding a way to accommodate, you know. For instance, writing music. You think about what is it that you want it to sound like in your head? Well, now the next step is how do you do that.

Sylvia: Those are some great soft skills. We often talk about these soft skills that you need more than technical skills to do a job. You need to know more than the job. You need to have these kind of things that you're talking about, Problem-Solving, persistence, finding a way to adapt things yourself. We can't sit back and wait for other people to create the accommodations. Oftentimes it's up to us. Yes, we can request technology, but oftentimes we're the ones trying to figure out where would that bump dot go to help me the best or how am I going to read those piles and piles of manuals and recognizing I might have to do some of that on my own time. And so, all of those wonderful soft skills you just shared. That's fantastic.

So, Stephen, you've been on this employment journey for quite a while. And as I said, you've had some really great success. And what do you say has really motivated you to stay on this challenging journey of upward mobility? In what I think is a pretty challenging field to be in, especially as someone who's blind and you might want to share a little bit more about what you do.

Stephen: OK, I just want to pause for a second and go back and answer or just point out to the listeners one thing you said that I think is such a key to success and how I've had success in my life. I want to overstate; which is don't wait for other people to accommodate you. Oh, I wish I could, I wish I could have even thought about that to share. Sylvia, that is a fantastic point. And I just want to just drill it into people that I never did that. I never waited ever. Because as you're waiting for someone to accommodate you, that you're you're basically kind of telling you, well, you know, I really can't do it, you know, I kind of need you to help me do this or whatever, and maybe I'm wrong, but that's how I look at it. That's how I think a manager might see it. And I've been a manager for I don’t want to say how many years, but a long time. But I'm never, in fact, I've hired numerous people with with disabilities and I've never because, of course, I'm blind. So, I know. But I never thought in my mind, oh, I need to accommodate this person and tell them to do something that I think they can do. Nope. I tell them I need this done and it's up to them to tell me they can't or they need accommodation. But I'm just saying, like, this was the work that needs to be done. Go do it.

Well, going back to the question you actually ask me. So that is what keeps me on the employment journey. I'm one I don't know how many people that are out there do something that they love to do, but I'm one of those people and I'm so grateful. I thank God that I I was able to have a job that I enjoy. And it's not every day I'm like, oh, I'm so glad I'm going. No, it's not always been that way, but I love what I do. And I've been blessed by being able to work with just many really great people who I've been able to learn different things from. So what keeps me on that journey is, one, that it's been fun and I'm one of those type of people where if I was sitting at home, like I was told when I was I don’t know 18, 19 years old or something eye doctor, ophthalmologist, said, oh, well, you know, I can fill out the the Social Security paperwork right now and you can just not work and collect Social Security. And I said Well, I don't want to do that. That didn't sound fun to me. And I'm not backing anybody that that's what they do. But for me, I can't sit at home. I'd go nuts. So, I've got to go do something. And it's great that I can do something in a work environment that I enjoy doing. And part of the things that keep me on this this career path is that I like challenges. I like to overcome things. I absolutely love to problem solve. That's one of the key things that I have, technical problem-solving skills. Just love it. I mean, some people like I like I love macaroni and cheese. I love problem solving. I know it's a technique.

Sylvia: That’s awesome.

Stephen: So, it keeps me going. I like to interact with people and, you know, going on the bus and going on the train and walking and things like that. I've met interesting people along the way. You get to practice your mobility skills all the time, so you don't get rusty. I like a variety of things in my life. And so, work has offered me all those things.

Sylvia: Awesome. Do you want to share a little bit more about exactly what you do?

Stephen: Oh, sure. So, you know, I started as a computer programmer. Then I realized that I didn't want to sit in front of a computer. I can't I'm too wiry. So, I realized that I couldn't do like thirty-five years sitting in front of a terminal. I figured I had to do something that I could maybe go up and down or move around, something like that. So, I said, OK, I have to branch out from there. I started reading these manuals on telephone switches, PBXs on how like if you remember the old days, cold waiting, we still have it, call waiting, caller I.D., transfer, all those kind of things, running the wires, cables, copper, fiber optics. And so, I started just reading manuals about it. And then I, yeah, this is funny. But anyway, I met a telecommunications technician that I told them how I thought his job was awesome and I asked them for the password, for the switch, the telephone switch. He gave it to me and then I just started using all my knowledge of just started hacking into this, hacking this thing and doing all sorts of really cool stuff. And so, I realized, like, wow, this is this is another fun thing that I can do. So, I started actually doing that for a living for a while. I enjoyed it. I was challenged with networking, being a network administrator, actually running and installing a network way back when the original started with IBM token ring. And then I had a friend that I used to go boating, avid boater and and so ship to shore calls were very expensive. I run into this guy who's got this handheld radio, with this antenna, 20 feet tall. I'm like, what in the world is that? And he tells me, oh, I'm making a ship to shore call on my radio for free. Like what? Tell me more. So anyway, I got an FCC radio license, and I started getting into the getting into that for various reasons. And this was all before cell phones were around. And so, it was like having a cell phone. But you might have to extend the antenna up to three or four feet. And but it was cool.

And so anyway, all these things, all these hobbies and experiences and jobs that I had all prepared me to work where I currently do now at Miami International Airport. And I'm the superintendent of the telecommunications technical shop division as well, and where basically we do most everything that's electronic that's in the airport. We've got some networks. We've got some security systems. We have all the radios, a whole bunch of different kind. I used to manage their telephone switches, but that branch broke off. Let's see. We can run our own cable television system company basically inside the airport. We have over 50 different electronic systems that we install, manage, design, implement, troubleshoot and perform maintenance on. I don't know if you want to hear any more.

Sylvia: So how many people do you supervise?

Stephen: So, right now, there was the time that I supervised over one hundred people and that was crazy. Crazy, never. So now it's definitely a lot more manageable. It's 18 people.

Sylvia: OK, but over 100. So, you have a pretty big-time job. You took all of these skills and made a career out of it, and that's impressive. So, if you can, share with us one, but thinking about our audience and people who are visually impaired, people who are losing their sight, counselors who are working with them, if you have one insight about the employment journey for someone who's visually impaired, what would that be?

Stephen: One insight would be don't give up on any dream you have. Don't think you can't do something ever. Because you can. And one thing I've learned, especially with an airport and all the money that the aviation industry has, if there's a problem that seems insurmountable, there's nothing that throwing a lot of money at it to fix it. And they'll just keep throwing money at it until they get what they want. And basically, everything in life is the same way. What do they say? Time is money. But if you spend enough time with something, you can achieve whatever it is. There's no mountain that's too high that you cannot climb.

Sylvia: Awesome. We might not have the money to throw at it, but we have the time to throw it, right?

Stephen: Exactly.

Sylvia: I got to say, there are some things. I'm not sure, no matter how much time I spend, I'm still not going to run a marathon.

Stephen: But blind people do.

Sylvia: Oh, plenty. Plenty of my friends who are challenging me. Yes. So, Steven, do you have a quote, a saying, a life motto, something you can leave us with because you are just profoundly successful and inspiring. So, any quote, motto?

Stephen: Well, I wouldn't really say a quote, but a motto is that I can do anything that I set my mind to and we can do that. Maybe we don't have it all within ourselves, but we can do that through any kind of spiritual connection, family members, friends. It's a journey that we're all on together. And I would just say don't let anybody stop you from what it is that you want to achieve. The only thing, in fact here would be to summarize, is it's a self-fulfilling prophecy. If you tell yourself, well, I'm blind, so I just can't do that, then that's exactly what's going to happen 10, 20, 30, 40 years from now, you're going to be sitting there and you're not going be able to do whatever it was that you wanted to do. I am going to do that because that's the way I am. If there's something I'm going to do, I am going to do it. One way or the other, I'm going to do it. I went snow skiing a few years ago, totally blind. I've been before, but I've never been totally blind because I said I'm going to do it. And hey I will tell you it is an adrenaline rush. But there's nothing, if you tell yourself you're going to do it, you will do it.

Sylvia: Awesome. So, some highlights from our conversation today are get out there, learn skills, use the skills that you're developing through hobbies and make something happen for yourself. Don't wait for others to accommodate you. You make those accommodations yourself and be a problem solver. And finally, you can do whatever you put your mind to it. Just keep working on it. And it might not work out the first time, the second time, the hundredth time. But keep going, because even if it's that one thing, you might find there something you love even better. So, thank you so much, Stephen. This has been fantastic. I appreciate you and your willingness to inspire everyone to really get out there and make something happen for themselves.

Stephen: Well, it was my pleasure.

Closing music