**Employment Insights with the NRTC – Episode 3**

Opening music

Introduction: Welcome back to Employment Insights with the NRTC. On this episode, we are joined by our host Sylvia Stinson-Perez and guest, Judy Matthews, continue listening to hear from Judy about her employment journey.

Sylvia: Today, I am just thrilled to have with me, Judy Matthews, who I have known for many, many years. In fact, maybe like 25 years. I go back to when I was in my probably 20’s and Judy was a teenager. So, you know, it has been glorious to watch Judy and her exceptional personal and professional success. So welcome, Judy.

Judy: Wow. Thank you. Thanks a lot.

Sylvia: So, Judy, I'm going to ask you a few questions. Tell us a little bit about your vision impairment.

Judy: Sure. I have an eye condition called Leber's Congenital Amaurosis. I was born blind. And the extent of my vision is light perception so I can tell that the lights are on or off in the room. But that's about all I can see. And that's been the case my whole life.

Sylvia: So, tell us about your work experience journey.

Judy: Sure. So, I would have to say my very first job was as a receptionist at the place where my dad worked at the time and my aunts and my cousin. So, it was a Saturday job. I was in high school. And, yeah, it was it was great to have had that experience. I got to get up at six, even though it's Saturday and I wish I could be sleeping in. Just being able to work on those customer service skills early on and things like that. Then I started college. My very first year of college, I participated in the work-study program and I was a teacher's assistant and did that for a year as part of my music therapy studies. I had to do practicums every semester, my last three years. And so, I had the opportunity to work in a variety of settings with a variety of populations. So, I learned a lot. I worked with mostly adults, adults with developmental delays, nursing home patients, adults with traumatic brain injuries. I worked at the VA with post-traumatic stress disorder patients and that was one of my favorites. I worked with Kids UCP, United Cerebral Palsy, and I also had a work experience at Easter SEALs. And I was when I was part of a summer transition program for teens. So, did that, of course, had an internship in music therapy at the Maryland School for the Blind and got to work with kids at zero to 21 with a visual impairment and various other disabilities. So in grad school, I actually was a note taker for a year for a classmate. And I also had a practicum and an internship in Vision Rehabilitation so with adults who were blind or visually impaired. I worked at Lighthouse Central Florida for about 17 years. I actually interned there and was able to secure a position there as a vision rehabilitation therapist. I also supervised the adult services program for the last six years that I worked there. Now I work for the, the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation here in Colorado and I'm an assistive technology specialist and I've been here for about a year, made a year at the beginning of this month. I don't know where the time goes.

Sylvia: So, one thing caught my attention that you said there. I mean, so many things because you've had just a really great career. But you said you were a note taker in college. A lot of times people who are blind have note takers. They aren’t the note takers.

Judy: Yep.

Sylvia: Tell us a little bit, just real quick about that.

Judy: So, one of my classmates had, I believe and I don't remember exactly her disability, but I think it was either dyslexia or she had a learning disability and she needed a note taker. And she heard me typing away on my at the time it was a Braille ‘n Speak. And she said, oh my gosh, you must take really good notes. Can you, you know, would you be interested in being my note taker? And I said, sure, why not? Definitely needed the money, so I got to do that for at least a semester, maybe a couple semesters, and so that was kind of cool.

Sylvia: That's awesome. So, you've had a long and successful career. So, what are three things that you wish you had known when you started out.

Judy: Well, probably one of the things that I would say has been so important and I probably realized the importance of this, although not to the extent that I probably should have. But even early on, I knew the importance of networking and getting to know people, because you never know when it's going to make a difference and get you a job or an internship. I remember when I met one of my supervisors at Lighthouse Central Florida, we were both in the Vision Rehabilitation Therapy Program at Florida State. She was doing the distance learning program because she was working full time and I was full time in the program and we had a class combined. It was a sewing class, I still remember. And so, she was there and I was, you know, thinking about internships. And my husband's also in the tech field. And so, at the time, he had just finished a certification and was looking for work. And so, of course, we had some time to mix and mingle in class. And I went and talked with Ginger and I said, hi, I'm interested in interning at Lighthouse. And, you know, I just wanted to meet you. And by the way, do you have any openings for an assistive technology specialist? So, I, she definitely remembered that over the years and said that it made an impression on her. I think that I just say that to emphasize that you just never know, like who, who is going to, like, make a difference in your career. And so, it's good to, to make those connections.

Sylvia: I will tell you, Judy, that in my professional career, I've had about five different places I’ve worked five or six at only one of those that I get, not, not because of my network. So that networking thing you're talking about is so important. And of course, with my job at the Lighthouse, the references came from my network. So networking, key. So that's one, networking. Number two?

Judy: Yes. Number two, I would say being your own advocate, because so many times I think that our biggest hurdle is not the blindness or visual impairment, it's people's attitudes. And so, I think having that confidence in yourself and that willingness to advocate and to let people know, yes, this is how I'm going to do X, Y, Z, even though I can't see, I do have reliable transportation to work because X, Y, Z, you know, I won't be able to see what someone is writing on the board, but here's how I'm going to get around that or whatever the situation might be, just having a plan and being able to articulate that and having that confidence in yourself because other people are going to see that and it's going to make a difference. So, yeah, advocacy would be my number two and I would say number three. And this was a really hard question. There's so much. But I would say always having a plan B and being flexible, don't put all your eggs in one basket and, you know, just assume that there will be a situation that won't work out the way that you plan. And just think about a way that you're going to be able to get that done a different way or just switch gears altogether. Now, there, there have been situations in my life where I'll have a plan and this is this is how I'm going to get here. And then it's pouring down rain. And guess what? I'm not taking the bus over there. So, let's see what else I'm going to do or, you know, just work just to bring it back to employment, you know, having lots of options. You know, if, if you're applying for work, don't assume that you're going to get that that one job that you applied for just, you know, keep your options open. And even when you think that this isn't the job that you had dreamed of getting or that you had planned on, or maybe it's a way to get your foot in the door somewhere or maybe it's just chalk it up to work experience. So, yeah.

Sylvia: Absolutely. So, adaptability, problem solving, and I love that, having a plan B. Sometimes you need a plan C, D and E as well.

Judy: For sure.

Sylvia: Right?

Judy: Yep.

Sylvia: But it’s about that never giving up, is that keeping going and pushing yourself on.

Judy: Yes, definitely.

Sylvia: So, what are the blindness skills that have helped you in your journey? And now you, you mentioned from the beginning that you don't have any usable vision. So that's a challenge. So, what are those skills that you think are critical for someone who is visually impaired or blind to have if they really want to be successful on an employment journey?

Judy: Gosh. So, as I was answering this, the first one that popped into my head was Braille. So, I put it there because there are so many. But I think that having being proficient in Braille has helped me throughout school and work to be able to be efficient, taking information down and accessing information. That's how I got one of my jobs. If I, you know, I was able to be a note taker for this person because I because of my Braille skills, you know, just in school, being able to have access to information, whether that be paper Braille or using a note taker. And so, of course, along with that is technology skills. I couldn't do my job without my tech. And now that I am an assistive technology specialist, you know, not only is it I mean, I get to, you know, talk about both sides of that because, you know, personally, I couldn't do my job without it. And then I know that the individuals I serve couldn't do their jobs without tech, even people that don't really have tech as part of their job description. But people still need to be able to log in and put in their time or email.

Sylvia: There’s very few jobs today. Right? Very few jobs where you don't have to use some technology.

Judy: For sure. Yeah. Along with the tech and the Braille, I would say organizational skills, even though they're not necessarily blindness specific because you don't have to be blind to be organized, but it really goes a long way. And I remember when I was in elementary school, I had my fifth grade TVI, teacher of the visually impaired. I remember she sat down with me one day and she said, we're going to read this passage and we're going to take notes and I'm going to show you how to do an outline. And, you know, first I was like, what is this about? I've never had anybody show me how to take notes, but I am so grateful to her to this day because it really helped me just to have a good foundation for that. And then, of course, orientation and mobility skills. You know, I can't imagine I mean, I moved from Florida to Colorado, had to, like, start over in a brand-new city.

Sylvia: That’s a big transition. Scary!

Judy: Very much so. I think my internship in Maryland was also another scary. I was pretty much moving across the country, didn't know anybody. And, you know, this was pre-Uber, Lyft and all the rest of the options that we have these days. I needed to get to the grocery store to get my food. And so, if I hadn't had the ability to walk there across the street and do what I needed to do, it would have been really difficult to be out on my own like that. So, and also, of course, the daily living skills, just being able to know what your clothes is so you can match for your interview. And I mean, I'm just throwing out just an example. But there's so much I mean, when I was in my second year of college, I decided to go to the Daytona Vision Rehab Center for the summer. I had taken vision rehab training before at the Lighthouse as a kid. That's where I met Sylvia. But I always had, you know, home to go to. My parents were there and I really didn't have to, like, fend for myself, by my own food, cook my own food, do all this stuff, you know, manage my own money. And I wanted to make sure that I knew that I could do it. And that's so important. Just being confident in yourself that, like, I've done this, I know I can. And so, I think that really gave me a foundation to be able to navigate everything moving forward.

Sylvia: Judy, that just brings up to me such a such an important thing. And I got a vision rehab degree kind of late about 12 years ago. And but I have always felt that that's so important is having those skills. And unfortunately, what happens is people have this rush to want to go to work and they want to get back to things. And it takes time, especially for those who acquire vision loss later or just who don't spend their whole life like you and I, where we had to learn those skills to just live everyday life. But who all of a sudden have vision loss or have substantial vision loss. Learn those skills. Taking that time, like Judy talks about to focus on getting those skills is something that can make all the difference in your level of confidence and your level of competence as a person who's blind. Once you have those skills, you don’t have to continue to work on them all of your life. But if you can build that solid foundation, it really does help a lot. And you mentioned Braille, Judy, and I think a lot of people feel like, oh, Braille is obsolete. I didn't grow up blind, so I didn't learn Braille. I I'll have to learn Braille. And I'm going to tell you that I've heard Braille when I was about 30 years old. I use it every day. I used Braille way before I \*quote\* “needed to” \*quote\* I could still see print for many years after learning Braille, but it sure did make so many things easier. I had file folders as a social worker that I needed to get out. And instead of having my nose on the drawer trying to find those files, I had them all Brailled and could pull them out. Having your spices braille and having, I literally Brailled directions to get to places that I needed to walk for before the iPhone.

Judy: Yeah, ok.

Sylvia: So, I didn’t get lost.

Judy: For sure.

Sylvia: There are so many things for organization, for labeling and at work. I mean, it's just so important. And so, when people say, well, I'm too old to learn Braille or, you know, it's hard. Nothing in life is really that easy. But when we take the time and really make the effort to learn, it really does make you a stronger person with skills that you can really use. And with the high unemployment rates of people who are blind, this is a key issue is that having these skills really matter.

Judy: Absolutely. Yeah, I can't imagine I know this isn't necessarily employment related, although, heck, I think socializing with your co-workers is a thing, you know, you need to be able to. So I can't imagine playing cards without knowing Braille like that would be really challenging. I know you can do it on the computer or some other ways. And there usually is another way to do everything, just about everything. But, yeah, I love I can't I love games and board games and cards and knowing it would be a lot more difficult without Braille.

Sylvia: A lot, a lot more difficult. So, there's so many things that would be a lot more difficult.

Judy: Yep, yep.

Sylvia: So, Judy, what are the soft skills that have been critical to your success? So problem-solving, those kind of things?

Judy: Yeah. So problem-solving, for sure. Communication skills I had that as my number one. I feel like so much hinges on how you communicate with people and having that follow up and really letting people know what your needs are. And it really goes hand in hand with, you know, your advocacy, because if you can't communicate what your needs are and be assertive about what they are, you know, it's going to be difficult and doing it in a positive way. So, I had positive attitude as my second one because people are looking. Employers want you to be solution oriented, not go in there. Oh, you know, this is not accessible. You know, blah, blah, blah. Of course, you're going to let them know something's not accessible. But here's how you can make it accessible. Can we do X, Y, Z to make that accessible for me or, you know, just being solution oriented when there is a situation, you know, and showing that I'm a people person. I get along with pretty much everybody, not a lot of people that I don't get along with and so having that teamwork and that cooperation, it goes a long way, you know, goes hand in hand with that networking and being able to give back. So not just like it's not just about how somebody can help you, but then how can you do something back for them. One of my mentors, when I was just starting out in the vision-rehab field, she was amazing with her humor. She could tell anybody just about anything. Like if we had something hard to say, I would go, Lynn, can you come tell this person that, you know, whatever? And she really taught me about using humor in my work and, and just in general, she helped me become more comfortable with that. So, I always felt like I had a sense of humor, but I wasn't as comfortable using it in the workplace and to, to you know, because there are times that things are going to be awkward to say or that people aren't as comfortable. You know, when you meet somebody that's just starting to lose their vision, you know, it really helps to get them comfortable and being able to, to talk about things. And so, yeah, I think humor was, was a big one for me once I got there. And so, of course, we talked about-

Sylvia: Humor makes you more relatable. It just makes you more relatable to people, too.

Judy: For sure. For sure it does. Yeah. And you know, even if you're nervous, like it really helps even for your own nerves, you know, make a joke or something. And yeah. Just problem solving and being flexible and having that plan B or C, you know, it really does help. And employers look for somebody that's flexible and is willing to look for other ways to get things done.

Sylvia: Right. So, you, you mentioned a positive attitude. And I have this great Helen Keller quote I wanted to share. And its, “Optimism is the faith that leads to achievement, nothing can be done without hope and confidence.”

Judy: I love that. That’s great.

Sylvia: I know.

Judy: Yeah. There are so many good quotes with that. My husband says I have rose colored glasses, so I'd rather have that than to be like cynical or pessimistic. I mean, there's enough of that to go around but.

Sylvia: I’m with you. I am with you, Judy. Yeah.

Judy: Let me have my rose-colored glasses. I'm good with that. Yeah.

Sylvia: So, share with us one major insight that you would like others who are starting out on their employment journey with vision loss or maybe in work transitions. What’s one major insight you’d like them to have?

Judy: Oh goodness. I mean, I think I've talked about a lot of the things that I had here. But I think one thing and I think we sort of touched on this before we started, but just not focusing so much on the obstacles. And this was hard for me in the beginning. So just going back to like elementary school, when I first started being mainstreamed. I did not have books in accessible format. They weren't in Braille. I didn't have recordings for the blind and dyslexic now Learning Ally. I didn't have that till I was in fifth grade. So, when I was in third, I think it was when I started doing more mainstream classes, I was really discouraged because I felt like I was falling behind. My family, my parents didn't speak English to be able to help me with homework. It was really hard. My brother. Good luck with that. He was a teenager and, you know, he, he tried, but so, you know, it was really hard. And so, I would just get discouraged by those little setbacks. Or at the time they seemed really big setbacks. But I made it through the class and I didn't fail. So, you know, now whenever I progressed through school and was able to, to see that, you know, even though there were challenges along the way, in the end I got it done. Being able to, to focus on the end, looking at the not so much on the little steps that I'm having trouble with was really helpful. For me, and like I said, as I as I went through school and college, I tried to just have that, you know, optimism or, OK, I'm struggling with this, but I’ll, I'm going to figure it out. I'm going to get it done and let's see how we can get it done. So, it's not always easy and it's not like you're ignoring those difficulties. You have to work through them. But just being able to-

Sylvia: Keep going.

Judy: Yeah, just keeping going, focusing and using your resources. And I've found that people in general want to help us, like they're not against us. So I think if you let people know and work with people, they're going to work with you. So I think those are some of the insights that have helped me along the way.

Sylvia: I just found this amazing quote that fits exactly what you just said from Marie Curie. “Life is not easy for any of us. But what of that? We must have perseverance and above all confidence in ourselves. We must believe that we are gifted for something, and that this thing must be attained.” I think that fits what you just said so well.

Judy: I love it. It's a great quote.

Sylvia: I'll send it to you.

Judy: Please, yeah, send me some quotes. I love quotes.

Sylvia: So, Judy, truly, you've had this really great successful career. And I think one thing that I admire about you is that where you could have stayed in one place, you kept moving upward and onward and exploring new dimensions of where you could give and where you could be the best asset to those people you wanted and needed to work with. And sometimes those are scary things. And so, I didn't send you this question in advance, but I think you can handle it. How do people handle those transitions that are scary? And I'm thinking about people who maybe have lost additional vision or lost vision or they've had to change a job or they had to move and all those kinds of scary transitions. I read that life is in the transitions. The scary parts sure are. What’s some advice you might have about facing those fears and getting through those transitions?

Judy: Well, I would say that having your support system and I know that not everybody has a great solid support system, but if you don't, finding that somewhere, whether that's, you know, with your family and friends or church or co-workers or find a support system. Because that is really going to help you through when you're having the tough days and you need someone to talk with about it when you need that little help, extra help that you know, you're going to need someone to ask. And it's OK to ask. Like, I know some of us and I've been guilty of this many times thinking that eh I'm just going to figure it out. I'm not going to ask anybody for help because you know, that pride thing. But, you know, sometimes asking for help is what we need to do. So having that support system and just pushing through that hard, you know, those tough times of, oh, my goodness, I don't know anybody here, I've got to build my support system again or, you know, I can't do the things that I used to be able to do because I can't see to read or I can't see to drive or I can't see to match my clothes and all the things that, you know, sometimes we kind of take for granted. But just realizing that there's usually another way to accomplish just about anything and asking people like, you know, find people that are going through similar situations and figure out how they're doing it and of course, can't say enough about skills and, you know, getting that training. But, you know, we're kind of biased on that because that's what we do.

Sylvia: That’s right.

Judy: But it's, it's so important. Just even like supporting one another, I think that connecting with people is huge because sometimes our family and friends who are not experiencing situations that we might be experiencing, they mean well and they want to help, but it's not the same as somebody that is living what you're living every day and can say, yeah, I know-

Sylvia: Connecting with those peer groups, those, those consumer groups, American Council of the Blind, National Federation of the Blind, Blinded Veterans

Judy: Yep.

Sylvia: The National Organization of Albinism. I mean, those are tremendous networks of people who can be that support system for you. And, you know Judy, I think often times and we've, we've all been there, we think we've got to be independent. We've got to show the world that we can do it. And I just have fallen in love with that quote from Helen Keller that says, “Alone, we can do so little together, so much.”

Judy: Together we can do so much, yeah.

Sylvia: And that interdependence. And you brought up earlier that, you know, yes, there are things that I need people to help me with, but I can reciprocate right back to them in different ways and understanding for me, independence for me means that I count on other people for certain things and that they count on me for certain things. So, independence for me really is about knowing there are things that maybe I could find a way to do. But why would I try so hard when it's going to take me 10 times longer and cost me so much more money when I could just ask for help and then I know I can contribute back to that person. So that's it.

Judy: Absolutely. Yeah, and I think like you said, Sylvia, we get so hung up on I got to be independent, but I think interdependence is so much more realistic and so much more achievable. And, and just I, I think it's, it's you know, I can't I can't say enough, it really is a Win-Win for everybody.

Sylvia: And to bring it back to employment. But isn't that what teamwork at work is all about? It's about interdependence. Teamwork at work is about interdependence.

Judy: Absolutely.

Sylvia: Our final question, Judy, which I think is a fun one, is to share with us one life quote, saying, motto, something that has helped you achieve the level of success and employment that you have.

Judy: I would have to say, and I know this isn't very deep or profound, but I would say “We will figure it out,” has been a motto that that I have lived by for a lot of years because there are going to be obstacles along the way in just about anything that we do. And just having that attitude of we will figure it out has really just helped me, like I was saying earlier, to focus on the outcome rather than these obstacles along the way. And there is another quote and of course-

Sylvia: I love that though. We'll figure it out. I mean that.

Judy: Yeah, yeah, we'll figure it out. I remember my husband and I wanted to go to the garlic festival, and I found out, by the way, that there are lots of different garlic festivals around the country. But we were going to one in Florida somewhere like West Palm or something. And we had called to, to see if we could get some assistance while we were there. And of course, we procrastinated and it was very last minute. And so, they were very willing to do it, but they couldn't pull it together at the last minute with like just a few days to spare. So, we just said, you know what, we're going to go anyway and we're going to figure it out. And we did. And we had a great time and we were glad that we didn't let that stop us or say, oh, well, you know, I'm not sure how we're going to get around there. Like, we just used all our tools. I mean, we have both have great orientation and mobility skills. We used Aira, we sent them a map of the event and we said, can you give us the lowdown on this and how these things are laid out? And we took some notes and we, of course, asked around and got directions. And just throughout the whole day, we just felt like the right people were in our path and we just were glad that we can-

Sylvia: And my guess is you got lost a couple times, but that was probably the cool part where you met somebody cool.

Judy: Absolutely. Yeah, just a couple of times. Lots of times. But we did. We did. We met lots of cool people along the way and we had a great time. And sometimes you get lost and you find things you weren't looking for.

Sylvia: Right. Well first off, I can't imagine going to a garlic festival. I'm all about the chocolate festival. But, you know, to each his own, to each his own.

Judy: Ooh, want to go there too! They had some. They had garlic ice cream, Sylvia. And yes, I had to try it.

Sylvia: Hmm… that’s all I’ve got.

Judy: My husband not so much, he tried it. He didn't like it. It was pretty good.

Sylvia: That's, that’s the whole Hispanic thing, OK? That’s where that comes from.

Judy: Yep, yep. But, but I will tell you that the national one like the biggest one is in Gilroy, California. And one of these days we're going to go to that.

Sylvia: OK. To each his own. You’ll figure it out.

Judy: Yep, yep.

Sylvia: Judy, it has been so great having you share your employment insights today. And thank you for your persistence in building your skills and your confidence and just figuring it out as you went along and being willing to share that with people on their journeys.

Judy: Sure. It's been a pleasure. I've enjoyed it. Anything that I can do to, if my experiences can help other people, then I'm always willing to share that.

Closing music