**Employment Insights with the NRTC – Episode 5**

Opening music

Introduction: Welcome back to another episode of Employment Inside with the NRTC. In this episode, we are joined by Jessica Loomer. Continue listening to hear about Jessica's employment journey, her balance on learning when to disclose her vision impairment and how mentors have helped her along the way.

Sylvia: Well, I'm thrilled to welcome my friend and fellow colleague Jessica today. Welcome, Jessica.

Jessica: Thank you so much for having me. This is exciting.

Sylvia: Awesome, Jessica. Share with us a little bit about your vision loss journey.

Jessica: Yeah, absolutely, so I lost vision almost 10 years ago, which is crazy to think its time flies so fast. And when I was losing vision that first year or so, I was the same age and I was actually employed. So, I had a brand-new job. I had started that position. I work for a mining company like Mattel. I worked at that company, started in October, and I started losing vision by early November. So, it was pretty quick within that first month of me losing vision of starting this brand-new job. And by the time March had, I had vision loss in both eyes. So, it was a pretty rough start to that position. But I was actually on that job for five years. They were incredible to me. It was a super small company actually based out of Chile. We had a small office that I worked with. And I supported the entire sales team in North America and it was a family environment, honestly, so I had a ton of support, I got a ton of assistive technology and never missed a day of work and just honestly kept going. And because it was in the copper industry or it was on the commodities industry, I actually got laid off five years later. So, five years into vision loss I had to face getting a brand-new job and kind of the what's next. And honestly, I didn't really know what I was up against once I had lost lost my job and lost my vision because I had never faced that. And so I was actually unemployed for a year and a half while trying to find my next position and just kind of had the struggles and trials and tribulations of learning how to overcome vision loss and how to truly feel comfortable in my own skin because it was different. I was telling a lot of people that were strangers that didn't know me. And so, it was interviews and practice interviews and really kind of preparing myself mentally and emotionally and feeling confident that I could go talk to different employers, but also how I was going to carry myself. And it was an interesting of the year and a half.

Sylvia: And I know that you spent some time in a job that was related to your career or your experience. Tell us about that. What do you think you gained from that experience?

Jessica: Yeah so, during that year and a half of unemployment, I needed to do something for myself, a lot of it, a little bit of soul searching and a little bit of digging to truly find that confidence, to walk into that interview room and have a cane and sit down and have enough confidence that that interviewer did not see my cane and they see me for me. And that took me some time to get there. I needed I needed to get back into the workforce. I wanted to feel that worth. I wanted to get back out there and I was at a reverse job fair, I had interviewed a bunch of places. And I think we all kind of go back to the things that we love. And I love coffee. So I went to go work for Starbucks and it was one of the happiest three months of my life. It was awesome. Starbucks is great. They made sure that I was comfortable. We did a ton of things throughout the entire store to make it accessible for me from like gigantic sharpies so I could label things and I could restock and things like that to bump dotting parts of the store so I'd be able to navigate and be able to identify things without having to ask for help. They were extremely accommodating, and it really got my confidence up. I saw that there was a way to accommodate anything you want to do and still feel productive and successful and part of part of a team and part of a community. And yeah, I prospered in that job. I flung garbage with the best of us. I made coffee drinks. I was up the front chatting with people. And I all of a sudden got to come back to, like, who I was again. My dad actually has a picture when he came to visit me at the store and I’m behind the counter. And he's like, this is the happiest I've ever seen you. And I mean, that's years ago. And I'm a pretty happy person. But it, I was I was beaming. I was really happy. I was confident. And I love that job. That was my pivot moment.

Sylvia: That's awesome. I do love me some Starbucks coffee. I love that you didn't see that as a step backwards. You use that as a bridge to your future. And that's amazing. And I think you learned you said a lot of lessons there. You learned confidence. You learned how to adapt things. And you just said you learned that anything was possible. So that's awesome. I know that during this process, you also really thought about and created strategies around disclosing your vision loss. So, share with us a little bit about that for your your stance on disclosing how you learned to disclose what you did.

Jessica: Um honestly, a lot of it was trial and error, but a lot of it came from me gaining confidence throughout that year and a half while I was looking for a job. And I would sometimes I would go in with a cane and sometimes I would go without a cane. And you knew it was bad when I walked into an office building that was full of glass and white chairs. So, there's no high contrast. There's nothing that you can see. I'm very much low vision. And so, I knew I was like at that point, I was like, this is not even smart. This is not even safe for me. But then I learn at the end of the day, we're all people. We all have something, right? Like we all have something that we're going through. And I learned that, like vision loss is just mine. And so, it took me that confidence to get there that like, yeah, I may be a low vision, but let me tell you what I can do. And so, I got to the point that I would walk into an interview and I just walked in and I sat down and I quickly had everything organized. So, I had a portfolio that had my resumes. I knew exactly what way there were. So, when I sat down and whoever was sitting at the interview table, I handed them the resume is the perfect the way that they should be. And I close my book and I get so excited to be here. And I just kicked off and I didn't even acknowledge vision and I didn't acknowledge my cane because it's not who I am in the sense of my productivity. My productivity is based on my skills and my expertise and what I bring to the table. My cane is just part of my personality. My blindness is my personality. That's who I am. And They get to learn all about that once they hire me. But that doesn't affect who I am professionally in a sense of my abilities.

Sylvia: And I know you develop a specific way to share with employers or potential employers how you do a job, what accommodations you would need. Tell us a little bit about that.

Jessica: So I actually had a lot of questions when I was interviewing and some appropriate, some not appropriate. And I was OK with that because I thought the more questions people asked, the more comfortable they would feel, because honestly, at the end of the day, I'm interviewing them as much as they're interviewing me. And I would want to feel comfortable to asking for accommodations and really kind of having that open conversation with whoever I'm going to be employed with. So of all the questions I kept getting asked, people would ask, well, what can you see and what do you need and how did you get here today and all of these questions? So I actually developed a video with my VOC rehab teacher, and it's in the video kind of showing what I how I use the CCTV and what I what exactly I'd be looking for. And it's a video of me using those tools. And obviously I pull the speed way down, but it shows me typing and it shows the audible of JAWS kind of speaking back to me and what it is. That video was helpful for other employers and interviews to be able to see like, oh, that's easy. That's possible. And so it kind of bridged that gap because honestly, there's a lot of employers that I've never heard of assistive technology. They don't know what JAWS is or CCTV or what does it entail. And that's kind of a lot of the big scary of hiring somebody because they don't know. So if I was able to have that video to show them, check it out. It's not that hard. Look at how easy I can work. These are just two devices and two software things that enable me to do my job and I'm still doing it. That was an easy and it made the conversation way easier.

Sylvia: And it was a short, short video, very short and to the point. And I love what you said there, too, Jessica, is that not only is the employer interviewing you, you are also interviewing them because it's so important that we remember that sometimes I think we're so desperate to have a job that we don't remember that having a job where we feel we fit, where we feel comfortable and confident is just as important. And so that is a really important point. So talk a little bit about then once you're on a job, how do you feel about disclosing to your co-workers about your vision loss and the accommodations you need and some strategies that people can use to make that a good, good experience?

Jessica: For sure. It's been a little different, especially with covid, where there maybe some coworkers of mine that don't even know that I'm visually impaired and some that I do clearly disclose to them just to ensure that we can work better together. I work in a in a tech company and actually oftentimes I'll be doing design reviews or kind of walking through a process with them and they'll say, like, OK, cool, let me share my screen with you. And I'm like, OK, that's fine. And then they'll start saying, yes, this thing over here or is it down here or over there? And I'm like. Can you hold on a second? I actually don't know where over there is, and so I'll kind of like take a step back and like, if you don't mind, I can actually explain to you what I see in order for us to kind of better work together. Quickly they're very apt to listen in like, oh, I had no idea. I'll share like apologies for kind of the hold back. But let's kind of talk about this really quickly now. I want us to be able to knock this out faster in the future. So I'll say, like, I have low vision, my screen is extremely zoomed in. And so when you say over here, over there, I don't exactly know where you're talking about, if you can maybe give me some direction on what part of the screen you're looking at or if you could highlight, I mean, obviously, there's a lot of things that work for different people, but you start to learn like what kind of navigational tools and direction you can give somebody that will say, like, is it the upper left of the screen, the upper right of the screen, like something that they can kind of resonate with so they can understand that, like you're so zoomed in. Oftentimes I will share my screen just so that they can kind of see the magnitude that I am magnified at. And then they're like, OK, I get it, you need more direction. And so we kind of have these aha moments. And I'm just honest, I think honestly, that year and a half of me being unemployed and me really kind of gaining that confidence and getting back, the longer you do it, the more open you are about it, the more comfortable you get with it and the more comfortable I am to be like hey I can't see that. Is there any way you can help me out or like can you point me in the right direction? I don't have any shame in it at this point. And I think honestly, it takes time. I’ve had vision lost for nearly ten years. This is not like this was a marathon to get to the point I'm at today. And it's it takes time to get to that point where you're comfortable saying can you help me out? Can you point this in the right direction or hey, by the way, like, I actually have a vision impairment if you could give me better directions so we can be on the same page. I would really appreciate that. And it's not a fast moving thing and it takes time, give yourself some time for that. But all of those conversations have really helped me ensure that everyone's on the same page. I actually have a designer that I work with. Whenever we're talking about something, he's like, alright Jessica I'm going to put this in the upper left hand corner so we're all in the same spot. So he always puts it there. And that makes it super easy for me to always find. And having those conversations early make it super easy. So now I don't have to stop anyone in the middle of our conversation saying, like, I don't know what you're talking about. I can't see what you're talking about on the screen because everybody already knows and everyone will stop and kind of say like, oh, wait, hold on, let's zoom in for Jessica. And people are really that are considerate. If they learn that about you, they want to make sure that everyone feels comfortable and on the same page once we have that way more productive together. And it's been great. So I guess my best advice for that, honestly, is take baby steps, take steps to sharing that with other people and sharing it with employers and coworkers. You don't have to do it all at once. It doesn't come all at once. It's the confidence thing and it takes time. But you'll get there for sure.

Sylvia: That's awesome. That's brilliant. And I think that part of that was it took some courage to just step forward and say, I can't see and these are the accommodations I need. Let's work together. And it is about working together to meet those needs. That's awesome. Great, great recommendations there. I know that mentors and mentoring has been an important part of your career journey. So share with us a little bit about how you select mentors, whether informal or formal, and some major lessons learned from that whole mentoring process.

Jessica: I love my mentors. I have a few mentors today, and they've evolved and grown and the biggest thing for me is the most important thing when you're looking for a mentor is to really ensure that you have the same beliefs, that there's multiple ways to kind of do something. And if you're on the same page with somebody and what you believe in and I'm not talking religion or anything like that, I'm talking like what you find true to yourself and what you think is best for yourself, because at the end of the day, your mentors is truly looking out for you and wants you also to be successful. So you know that they're the person that you can count on, because no matter what you're going to say or what decision, they're not thinking about the business. They're not thinking about the company. They're not thinking about your team. They're thinking about you, too. And that's the most important thing to kind of look at. I've had so many mentors along the way of kind of people giving me advice and giving me direction, helping me kind of point myself in the right direction of what career path to go down, what industry, how to handle a situation on my team. Those are kind of things that I try to mentor for just to kind of get a second opinion, get an outsider view. They're not in my day-to-day everyday life. And I think it's great to kind of have that step back. Another person removed. I say like, here's the situation. Here's what I have. What's your opinion and how can you help guide me? Or what, what's your opinion if I went to my BP and said this? And they're like, oh, don't do that, Jessica, or that's a great idea, that shows initiative. And so you can find them anywhere. I mean, honestly, one of them was an AT instructor I actually worked with directly and eventually, like our working relationship just evolved. And he said he saw so much potential in me and wanted to help me get to the next level. I would go to lunch with him. And We just kind of talk about strategy. And I was always kind of thinking of like, what's going to be my next move, what's going to be my pivot point? And so we would kind of talk through those things. And it's an evolving process. I talked to him here and there now and today. One of my mentors actually works at the same company that I do, but we work nothing at all together. But it's great to get her outsider experience. And I think you find them in the coffee shop. I think I'm a pretty social person. So you just start chatting with people, learn those people that you begin to like resonate with and that you kind of click with. I always look for people above me and kind of leadership level as well. I, I often will be observant. You know go into meetings where you are part of leadership is maybe directing, you are kind of giving a presentation and see how they handle themselves, see how they present to other people or how they handle questions. Is that how you want to handle it too? Is that how you want to like what's their perception of, like of your team or what's your perception of them? Is that how you want to be perceived as well? And I look for those people that I have high respect for leadership. Reach out to them. You can say I'm actually looking for a mentor. Would you be willing to meet with me once a month and make the cadence? Not I would say not as often, because you don't want to come across too forward or it seems like it's too much of a commitment for them. But would you be willing to meet with me once a month? I would love to bring something and I bring an agenda every time professionally because I have questions. These are situations I'm running into. How would you handle it? These are conversations that I'm having. Do you what, how would you answer these conversations? Or I like to kind of take my team and move it this way. And I want to be able to have this pitch for an additional team member because of X reason. What do you think? And I kind of have these and these are these are all kind of ideas I maybe would have in my head, but I wouldn't move on them until I would talk to a mentor and say, like, give me your opinion. And that's been super successful for me as well. For a professional mentor, personal mentor is just kind of honestly, you begin to see them as you start networking. I cannot rave enough about how much you should be networking, find any anything like whether it's a professional network. There's obviously a ton of them. And there's there are way more online now ever since covid or or you want to run or you want to do sew, or you like cooking like all of those, you never know who you're going to run into, of whether it's a hobby or a professional interest. And as you begin to develop those relationships, you will begin to find those people that you click with that maybe I mean, you never know. You could be running, I could be running with a VP of a different company that I would want to work for, or I could be cooking next to somebody that does something else that I really want to learn from. I think there's always opportunity. So throw yourself out there and just network, and even if it's virtual, I think those are opportunities for connections are huge, and that's where I think the personal mentors come from. And so those two things, they really will help you kind of take you to the next level. They'll give you insights that you maybe didn't think of, especially if they're older or have a different position or a different perspective. They've been truly valuable. So that's that's literally been my rock in the last five years. I've made a lot of career changes. I've picked up my life in Tucson, Arizona, and I've moved to Denver, Colorado, for a job. And I've never thought anything twice because the best move I've made. But I reached out to my mentors, my family, my friends, and to ask for advice. And all three of those groups of people are super important to me and their opinions are valuable. And I wouldn't be here today being able to be as successful as I am and how happy I am today if I didn't have those rocks to be able to lean on.

Sylvia: That's awesome. I love how you said somebody saw potential of you because you are truly fantastic and super successful and just a total go getter. So my next question, Jessica. That was great About mentors. So many important points you make there for formal and informal mentors and having set up a meeting schedule, having an agenda, having specific discussion topics or questions that really bring such value. And I'm going to say that I'm sure many people consider you a mentor as well, Jessica. I think an important thing is sometimes people feel like, oh, I don't want to ask them. They might feel like I like they're going to be overwhelmed by another person asking them. People are honored when you ask them to be your mentor, or you ask for assistance. They truly are. I mean, I'm super fortunate to get to be an informal and formal mentor to several people. And it's an honor and a privilege that I don't take lightly because I agree with what you said. I would not be where I am had it not been for those people in my life. And I still have mentors. I think that you always have mentors in your life or you should always have mentors in life and you can be a mentor while also have mentors. So my next question is. Thinking about the individuals who might be listening to this podcast, it could be vocational rehabilitation counselors, it could be people who are visually impaired, seeking out assistance from a VA counselor or who are visually impaired could be employers. So what’s some advice or recommendations that you would think that you hope all those listeners would really take from this that one piece of advice you had?

Jessica: I would say keep pushing, honestly. So I share this often that someone will tell me if they have just lost vision. So what should I do next? And my answer and question always to them is, what do you love? What's your passion? What do you want to do? And then they'll respond to me and say, I don't know. But I'm like, try something out. There's no harm in jumping into a job and realizing you don't like it. It's OK. Like, it's totally OK. If you jump into a job and you're like, this isn't for me, then try something else. And I think that's key is that it's totally OK to try something. I think it's respectful for the employee and the employer at that. Like jump in there, give everything you've got. If you don't love it, it's totally OK to try something else. What did you love from that job or that position that you can kind of take to the next position? And what are you looking for differently? And that's honestly how I fell into my position where I am today is that I found the things that I love. I know I'm really great at doing Excel spreadsheets and I love that. But also, I know I'm great at project management, so how can I pull these together and what's the outcome I'm looking for? And so talk with your VR counselor or think about what are the strengths that you have and what position with that kind of be. And they'll be great to be able to help you kind of pick out. But just getting out there, I think the biggest leap is I was just actually just sharing this with somebody that had lost vision a couple of years ago. And he was having a hard time kind of jumping to that to a position because he was scared he would pick something wrong. And I said there's no reason for picking something wrong or no harm in that, because what's the biggest thing that you need to make sure you're doing next is still moving forward. And it honestly doesn't matter. Like that's why I believe that Starbucks was a pivot moment to me instead of being seen as like stepping back or anything like that, me sitting in a Starbucks parking lot waiting for my ride to come for, gosh, like an hour or two based on that window for paratransit that gave me so much opportunity to really kind of reflect and think back. What do I want to do? What strengths do I have and where do I want to go from here? And honestly, I went from Starbucks to working at the University of Arizona in an Accademia position. No one thought twice of the position where I was going from Starbucks to the university. I was able to really pick right back up where I left off. No one thought of that, of me having that lull in my employment gap and no one thought anything of me having a retail job or a food industry job. They continued to see me moving forward. And so don't be so hard on yourself. Get out there and try it. And it's OK if it doesn't work out, that's not failure at all. Failure is not moving forward. You want to keep being able to go in and try something. And the employer honestly is going to find it much more respectful from you. If you're like, honestly, this isn't working for me. These are my interests, and this is just not my fit. And they'll be like, respectfully, that's fantastic. And maybe they'll say to you, Oh, that's what you're looking for. We might have something different for you. Or they might say, like, wish you the best and I can give you a recommendation for your next job. You know there's so many opportunities that you could open doors with having that respect for yourself and for your employer.

Sylvia: So keep moving forward. And I'm going to just throw in here. I mean, this has been such fantastic advice. If you can't find a paid position, part of that keeping moving forward is if you can't find something that where you're volunteering because keeping that strong work ethic, getting up, going to work, doing projects, keeping your skills, using the technology, using the mobility skills and accessing transportation. And I'm sure while you were out there sitting waiting for an hour for the transportation to come, you're like there must be a better option. And so figuring those pieces all out, all of those things just are so important. This has been fantastic. So to wrap it up so give us a life quote mission, something that you live by that you think has really led to your success. I mean, not that you haven't already given us such gems, but one more.

Jessica I actually have this quote on a gigantic poster in my room and it says, be fearless in the pursuit of what sets your soul on fire.

Sylvia: Love it. Thank you, Jessica, so much for this great information and being willing to share and to share so authentically.

Jessica: Thank you so much. I love to share my story because even though life is great right now, life was hard before and we all can get there.

Closing Music