**Employment Insights with the NRTC – Episode 8**

Opening music

Introduction: Welcome back to another episode of Employment Insights with the NRTC. We are excited to bring you another episode where we sit down with an individual that is blind or has low vision and talk about their employment journey. In this episode, we are joined by host Sylvia Stinson-Perez and our guest, Jennifer. Continue listening to more about Jinnerfer’s career that led her to become a massage therapist.

Sylvia: Welcome to NRTC Employment Insights, and this time we have Jennifer, who is a massage therapist. I'm super excited, Jennifer, about this conversation. Welcome.

Jinnerfer: Thank you.

Sylvia: Jennifer, share with us just a little bit about your vision loss. Um, what can you see? How long have you been visually impaired and the stuff like that?

Jinnerfer: OK, so I was born visually impaired. I was born with a rare form of retinitis pigmentosa. I do not remember the name of it. I have had so many different diagnoses. But I do know that it's rare enough for them to have taken pictures to put in a text book when I was 16 years old. I have never been able to see well, I used to be able to see lights and shadows, colors. I used to be able to read large print and I could do that comfortably until probably about the sixth or seventh grade, I had to start using a cane when I was 10, and I had to start learning Braille when I was eight years old. And by the time I was probably about 17 or 18, I only had light perception. I couldn't distinguish like any shadows or forms or anything else it was just I tell the difference between night and day and whether a light is on or not. Now, at the age of forty-three, I can see light sometimes and sometimes I wonder, actually I can see light. I was going to say sometimes I wonder if I could actually see the lights of my brain registering that there should be light on. And I think that happens sometimes. But it's kind of a in and out with a light perception. Oh, and also have keratoconus

Sylvia: You remember. And I can relate to that light perception thing. So tell us about your kind of work journey. What kind of training have you had? What kind of work have you done, volunteering, etcetera

Jinnerfer: So, I don't have a lot of working experience, but I have been volunteering since I was a child. It started off in high school. The class was doing a report on Helen Keller, and instead of me writing a report, I did a presentation. And from there from that English class. I got pushed to another English class that was doing Helen Keller. And I ended up doing it every year for three years while I was in high school. And then I volunteered to go to my sister's school when she got to high school. She's four years behind me and I was her extra credit and that branched off to me volunteering to go to different schools in the district. I lived in Cleveland, Ohio at the time. And I went to different schools and talked to different kids and preschools. And none of these this these were not classes for the visually impaired. It was actually just talking to people who could see so that they can to educate them more. I worked for Marriott for five years in their reservations. I was a fun buncher for probably about six weeks, maybe two months at Six Flags. But we found out that we spent more money than we made. So that didn’t last that long and I have volunteered, actually, I still do volunteer for the National Federation of the Blind. I'm very active. I'm currently the president of my chapter, that is ending the next month. But I will continue to volunteer for the federation, as well as I’m on our state affiliate board. And now I am a massage therapist and that is a whole nother story. But I am a massage therapist now. I went to school for massage therapy twice. The first time was in Ohio, probably about 14 years ago, and I went through an 18-month program and did not pass my state board exam. So, there was a lot of moving around. I moved to St. Louis and didn't work for a while, and then I moved to Las Vegas and I was here for about two or three years, I want to say about two years. And I have a daughter now and she's getting big and she wants stuff. And I was like, I have to do something. And I really had a passion for massage therapy the first time I went to school for massage therapy. And I'm like, what can I do that does not require me to go to school for eight years because I wanted to go into psychology, but that's a lot of education. And I just couldn't see me working, going to school, and being a mother at the same time. And I was like, oh, you know what, I think I'll get back to massage therapy because I absolutely loved it before. So, I went to school in Las Vegas for ten months. And to show you I always say things happen for a reason. So, in those ten months I learned that I learned nothing in those 18 months that I went to massage therapy school in Ohio. I learned so much at this school and I took my MBLEx exam, which is our state board exam, and passed it the first time. And now I'm a massage therapist.

Sylvia: That's awesome. And you know what? You probably have people talking to you all day while you're doing massage. So, you get to use a little bit psychology anyway.

Jinnerfer: So, I do sometimes. People don’t just um, every once in a while, I'll get a talker. But for the most part, people just come in and are like, I'm stressed, I'm hurting, and they lay down on the table and they’re asleep in five minutes.

Sylvia: And that's awesome. I mean, you're doing a good job. So, before we talk more about the massage therapy, how have you handled disclosure of your, of your blindness to people, to your employers?

Jinnerfer: I am very open. I have no problem with talking to people about my blindness. I tell them what I can do. I don't allow them to tell me what I can't do. Now, I did have an issue there. Of course, they're not going to come out and tell you that they're not hiring you because you're blind. But I have. I had an issue with a spa that I was interviewing for, and before I interviewed, I toured the spa. Now, this spa is massive and it's inside a massive hotel and I was intimidated. I was a little intimidated. However, I don't let people know that I'm intimidated because they'll take that and run with it. And the young lady who was giving me the tour, she was very discouraging. And she was like, I got lost here in the first month. And I told her I explained to her that I have a mobility instructor and I just need to know where I need to be. I don't have to walk around this entire spa all the time. That's where I've been in larger places and I won't have a problem. And she kind of kept at it. And I went through the entire interview process. This place’s interview, someone said it's like NASA because you have to go through a phone interview, an interview with human resources, an interview with two lead massage therapists. And I actually did two hands on interviews. I've heard other people have only done one hands on interview. So, I went through the entire interview process and to get to the first interview process at this place, because it's pretty exclusive, is very difficult. So, going through the entire interview process, I was like, yes, I have the job. I never heard back from this place. And one of the people interviewed me was the young lady who was very discouraging about me getting around the place. So, I kind of want to say she had something to do with that. But I don't know, I, I let them know it's difficult for me not to let people know that I'm blind. I'm walking in with a cane. I can't see. So, it's not an option for them not to understand that I’m blind

Sylvia: Do you tell people before you come in or do you wait until you arrive and it's obvious?

Jinnerfer: No, no I don't think that it's necessary for me to tell them when I come in. That's not necessary. However, if they look at my resume, all of my volunteering is with the National Federation of the Blind. So, they pretty much know it when I come in anyway.

Sylvia: They didn’t read through the lines well.

Jinnerfer: Yeah, it's not necessary to let them know that you're blind before you come in. That's not part of your resume. It's not, it has nothing to do with you actually doing your job. But they're going to see you and you have to go in. I will say this, if when you do apply for jobs and when you go in for interviews, you have to go in with confidence.

Sylvia: Yeah, so what would you say are the, you know, three maybe major skills that have really helped you be successful?

Jinnerfer: Like faking it to you make it. Like I said, confidence.

Sylvia: [laughs] confidence

Jinnerfer: I can fake confidence like you wouldn't believe. I'm always myself. I think that I have a great personality and I've been told that I have a great personality. I've always been myself when I go into an interview. I don't treat interviews like they're interviews. I'm going in here to talk to a person. They have questions. I have answers. And knowing what I'm talking about before I go in there, like, absolutely knowing my job, knowing what position I'm going in to apply for, which feeds into the whole confidence.

Sylvia: Being prepared

Together: Being prepared.

Sylvia: Yes, that's what that's. Yeah. So, are there specific blindness skills, you think, have really made a significant difference? And you talked about getting around this huge hotel, so mobility skills have to be really critical. So, what are some of those blindness skills that you've had to use?

Jinnerfer: With massage therapy, the one great thing about massage therapy is all you need is a table and some oil to perform your job. So, I haven't, the only skill that I would say that I have really had to use is my mobility. You do need a good sense of touch. And some people think that because you're blind, you have like the best sense of touch. There are some people who do not for medical reasons or whatever reason that is. But I don't like, mostly mobility, but just me personally, I have a great sense of discernment so I can tell when someone's not feeling well. I can go to the place on their bodies that um, that I'm pretty sure is causing them pain. I can find, not that maybe someone else couldn't find. So definitely have patience.

Jinnerfer: Have patience. But I don't on my job I don't need Braille. We don't, they use a computer. But OK, so here's, I'm sorry I had to think about it. So, our software, a lot of the software for the booking and everything is not very accessible. It's not good at all. And it's hard for people who can see to operate these systems a lot of times. And so, they can look, the other therapists can look on the computer and see if their guest has checked in, if their schedule has been changed. It doesn't work for me. It's not accessible, not even with the access we have. I have glasses that can read the screen and everything. And so, we've worked it out with the front desk and they text me when my client comes in. So my, I-

Sylvia: So, you found an accommodation.

Jinnerfer: Yes. Yes. So, my iPhone works, it accommodates me so I use my phone, I keep my phone on me. My watch. I use my watch for a timer. So, those are things that I use.

Sylvia: Great. So, what challenges have you faced and how have you overcome those as a massage therapist?

Jinnerfer: I think my biggest challenge was what I was just saying about the scheduling and everything, and we worked that out. That was the biggest challenge. Getting hired was sort of a challenge, and it had nothing to do with me being blind and everything with my standards for the spa that I want to work in. I went through a lot of interviewing and it was you know, I did well on my interviews. I actually got a few job offers, but I didn't like the places that were offering me the job. Their standards for cleanliness was not what I preferred. There was just that one place that I had an issue with. Like I said, I was intimidated. I'm actually kind of glad I didn't get hired at that spa because it was really it was crazy. It was really crazy having to get to the spa and going through the spa. It's not that I couldn't do it, but it was if you could see this place, it was unnerving. But the place that I work in now is great. It's in a hotel and it's there's no casino. It's a family hotel. It's a timeshare. So, it's so easy to just walk in, walk down the steps, make a right. And I'm at the spa and it's a small spa. So, yeah, there's not very many challenges in massage therapy, which is why I think a lot of blind people choose it because it's, it's like the perfect job where you can make a lot of, a lot of money or a nice amount of money and it doesn't require a lot. It's taxing on your body because you're doing a lot of pushing and pulling. You have to stand up all day, but you don't have to be able to see to do it, and you can live off of that money comfortably.

Sylvia: Great. I'm glad you found this and that you came back to work even after having maybe what some people would consider a really negative experience. You circle back and when you were ready, you came back to it. So that leads me to my next question. I think that's a really important question. A lot of VR counselors listen to this podcast as well as people who are blind. What do you wish that all VR counselors knew working with people who are blind?

Jinnerfer: I wish they all knew that we know what we want. What we want to do. And those of us who don't know we want to do, we need for the counselors to be counselors and help us find directions, because I think that's what the counselors are supposed to do. Some of us who are just coming out of high school, we don't know exactly what we want to do. We don't know what we can prepare for. And we need direction. And I know that they have some tests that we can take that point in the direction. I actually test that really high in the clerical department. I'm great at computers and everything, but it wasn't what I wanted to do. It's not so much what they should know, but I've had, my experience throughout the years with counselors is them being very discouraging when I tell them what I want to do and when I was younger, I was easily led away from where my passion was. And I can see that with someone who is nearly blind. They want to do this, but their counselors say “Oh, no, you should do that.” And I've had that happen. I've been in three different states and I've had that happen in every state. And, you know, and it made me wonder, are they teaching these counselors to do this because it's the same experience in each state? And finally, once I got older and again got confident, I go. I went into the office and I said, “Hey, this is what I'm going to do. Are you going to help me or do I need to speak to a supervisor?”

Sylvia: OK, so listening to your client and helping them discover their passions, their skills.

Jinnerfer: And not what you think they should do.

Sylvia: OK, so my final question, Jennifer, is what's one piece of advice that you would give any person in your shoes, who's maybe one of those people who've grown up visually impaired or someone who as an adult all of a sudden had vision loss and wants to continue working?

Jinnerfer: I would say go for it. Do your research. Don't think about what you can't do, because the only thing that you can't do is see. Do your research. Find a way to do what you want to do. We have access to all kinds of technology. Google knows everything. So, find your passion. Find out what you want to do. Find a way to do it. Once you figure that out, you can go in with confidence. I keep on stressing this word, confidence, because you have to have that. It's and if you don't have it, do like I do and sometimes you got to fake it. You got to go in there like, yes, this is what I'm going to do and it's going to happen and it'll happen for you.

Sylvia: So, I like what you said too earlier, Jennifer, in other words, you said, be prepared. And when you're prepared with the knowledge, with the skills, with the information, that can give you that confidence, that self-assurance.

Jinnerfer: Yes. Yes.

Sylvia: Awesome. Thank you so much. This has been fantastic.

Jinnerfer: I've enjoyed talking to you

Closing music