The Power of a Job
Do you remember your first job? Early work experience gained through a first job can be powerful, especially when young adults are still in their formative years. First jobs teach important life lessons: Success begins with showing up every day, on time, ready to do your part. They teach that there will be some tasks you enjoy and others you dread. They teach you to adapt to the established rules and the unspoken norms of the workplace. And they teach you where you fall in the pecking order—and that where you fall means that many days you go home from your shift feeling humbled and gritty. But these first jobs also instill a sense of pride from overcoming setbacks, accomplishing goals, and earning a paycheck. First jobs teach you that hard work builds your character, your identity, and your self-confidence.

For young people with disabilities, a first job can be especially transformational. Entering college after high school, so often a rite of passage for young adults, is not always a realistic option for those with disabilities, particularly those with learning and intellectual
disabilities. Information processing deficits pose considerable challenges to mastering the academic rigor of higher education. College is not for everyone, and for youth with disabilities, employment often emerges as the most logical post-secondary option. For many at this age, however, even those without disabilities, employment may seem to be an elusive and daunting prospect. Too often, youth may not know what kinds of jobs to look for, where to apply, or how to interview. To guide them on the path from school to work, young adults need mentors and advocates who can help them break down barriers to employment. Youth, particularly those with disabilities, often find the transition from public school entitlement programs to the world of work to be a rude awakening.

The innumerable services afforded in public school special education programs may not translate into the competitive working world. Despite more than 25 years since the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act, business and industry is no more inclined to recruit, hire, accommodate, and assimilate persons with disabilities. For this reason, youth with disabilities and the employers who hire them need the intensive pre-employment training and the ongoing post-employment support for which Bridges From School to Work (Bridges) has earned a national reputation.

For more than 25 years, Bridges has set the standard for school-to-work transition services for both in-school and out-of-school youth with disabilities. Bridges collaborates with school systems, vocational rehabilitation programs, and workforce development agencies to help youth prepare for jobs, get jobs, and keep jobs. But Bridges does far more. It fosters long-term job retention for youth in competitive, integrated employment by providing one year of post-hire monitoring, follow-up, and support. The program serves a dual purpose: to meet the needs of youth with disabilities and the businesses who hire them. Bridges matches businesses with job-ready young adults whose skills, aptitudes, and abilities are ideal for their entry-level opportunities.

This proven approach affords youth a brighter future and provides funders a solid return on investment.
What’s more, jobs for youth pump wages and taxes into the local community, enhancing the economic vitality of the cities where Bridges operates.

Achieving job placement and retention outcomes for youth with significant employment barriers requires specialized personnel: committed, qualified, compassionate professionals with business acumen who believe in the transformational power of a job for youth with disabilities.

Salaries for direct service personnel comprise the majority of the organization’s budget. Unfortunately, there are far more young people with disabilities who need Bridges services than any one funding source can support alone. Financial resources from government agencies, private foundations, and individual donors are needed to help these young people realize their employment dreams, goals, and aspirations.

The Time is Now

Support for Bridges has never been more critical. Each year nearly 400,000 young people with disabilities exit the public school system, but most are left without any concrete plans or supports to help them bridge the gap between high school and employment. Many face socioeconomic challenges that often compound their employment barriers. Most lack the knowledge and self-advocacy skills to navigate a highly bureaucratic adult workforce development and vocational rehabilitation system.

Polls show the majority of young adults with disabilities want to work. However, according to the American Community Survey, only 31% of youth with disabilities (age 16-20) were employed after high school in 2014. Add poverty to the equation, a reality for a majority of Bridges youth, and rates of employment are far lower. And, most Bridges youth are ineligible for the safety net of Supplemental Security Income administered by the Social Security Administration because their non-evident or “invisible” disabilities are not significant enough to qualify them. Yet such invisible disabilities create very real barriers when it comes to post-secondary education and employment. These disabilities typically include specific learning disabilities, attention deficits, and psychosocial disorders. Without targeted interventions from a program like Bridges, these 17-24 year-olds remain in the gap between school and work, joining the ranks of disconnected youth (neither in school nor in the workforce) now numbering in the millions.

“We’re proud to be among the first supporters of this model employment program that empowers young people with disabilities to live productive lives.”

Kevin Webb
Mitsubishi Electric America Foundation
Contributing more than $400,000 to Bridges since 1991.
The economic drain associated with every disconnected youth is estimated at $11,500 per year in lost earnings and taxes. Alternatively, according to a Social Security Administration study published in the *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation*, participants placed in jobs through Bridges have annual earnings that are $4,000 higher at age 25 than their non-Bridges participating peers, and by age 30, the earnings difference increases to more than $6,200 annually. This is because Bridges provides young adults the support, training, and encouragement that helps them steer clear of destructive influences, leading them instead on a path to employment. Research unequivocally demonstrates that paid work experience is a primary predictor of future success and quality of life: Paid, competitive, integrated employment is a key vehicle for achieving long-term employment success, but this can only be achieved with an effective process for transitioning youth with disabilities from school to competitive work. After 25 years and serving 21,000 youth with disabilities, Bridges has perfected the school-to-work transition process.

For a program like Bridges to work, however, the sole focus cannot be on youth alone. Business and industry must also reap benefits. Businesses continue to identify the development of a skilled and committed workforce as one of its key challenges. Noted in recent research, employers who have hired Bridges youth indicated that hiring persons with disabilities as a way of “giving back to the community” is less important than hiring persons who can perform on the job and add value to the business’ bottom line. Bridges couldn’t agree more; Bridges matches local employers with youth who are going to be assets, not liabilities.

An initial investment in Bridges services for young adults with disabilities generates a return on investment for not only donors and funders, but also for the youth, their families, their school districts, and their communities.

**Articles Featuring Bridges**

*Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation:*

*Rehabilitation Counseling Bulletin:*

*Journal of Rehabilitation:*
Goals Achieved, Lives Transformed

Steven Chew has spent most of his life swimming upstream. His learning differences posed considerable challenges for him both personally and academically. Neither his family nor his community afforded him a sense of belonging, and these circumstances eroded his self-confidence.

In 2013 Steven discovered Bridges and everything began to change. Steven said that finding Bridges gave him a sense of acceptance he had never encountered. Through Bridges, he connected to people who believed in him and supported him. He found an organization that recognized his potential and would help him realize it.

Steven really wanted a job, but whenever he found himself in a stressful or unfamiliar situation he lost his ability to communicate or even to make eye contact. Through Bridges, he began to apply and interview for jobs, but his self-esteem was so low that no job offers came. In order to win over employers, Steven would have to learn to make eye contact, to smile, and to emphasize his abilities.

With encouragement from Bridges, Steven worked tirelessly, determined to develop the social and communication skills that were so challenging for him. Month after month he volunteered in an office setting so that he could become more comfortable interacting with others, building his self-confidence, and asking for feedback about his progress. Eventually, Steven’s persistence paid off. He received a job offer from the San Francisco Zoo.

Steven’s first days on the job were not easy. Though he diligently did his work, he was painfully shy. Over time his confidence grew, and his focus on work won him attention. The Junior Sous Chef at the zoo complemented Steven’s “great attention to detail that make him a pleasure to work with.” In his two years of employment at the zoo, Steven’s performance as a model employee won him the 2016 Stephen G. Marriott Leadership Award at the annual Bridges gala held in Washington, DC.

Steven’s achievements haven’t ended there, though. With the help of Bridges, he moved from his role at the zoo to a full-time opportunity with the San Pablo Lytton Casino, where he receives a full array of health and welfare benefits. He now lives with roommates in an apartment that’s within walking distance of his new job. He continues to plan for his future, one that he hopes will include his own home with a wife and children.

With his positive attitude—and with a little help from Bridges—Steven is not among the millions of this country’s disconnected youth. Instead, Steven, like thousands of other Bridges participants, is a prime example of the power of a job in transforming the lives of young adults with disabilities.
Origins of Bridges

J.W. Marriott, the founder of Marriott International, was a firm believer in “abilities.” This meant hiring people for the things they can do, regardless of perceived disabilities, and taking care of employees so they could, in turn, take care of customers. With this strong belief in abilities of all people, the Marriott family established an independent foundation—The Marriott Foundation for People with Disabilities (MFPD)—the centerpiece of which became Bridges From School to Work. MFPD is not a corporate foundation but, instead, a registered 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization, eligible for government funding, tax-deductible gifts, and awards from grantmaking foundations.

You Can Make a Difference

Your investment in Bridges is backed by more than 25 years of funding from The J. Willard and Alice S. Marriott Foundation whose support covers core operational costs. Funding for Bridges generated in local communities stays there as MFPD dedicates 100 percent of local support to be used for services that directly impact youth in local Bridges programs.

Each year Bridges helps more than 1,000 young people with disabilities make the transition from high school special education programs to the competitive, adult labor market. Our strategic priority is to serve 1,500 youth annually by 2018 and to expand into new cities around the country, bringing Bridges services to the communities and school districts that need it most.

With your assistance, we can achieve this growth goal. Your support will create employment opportunities for youth, meet the hiring needs of businesses, and improve the economic vitality of communities across the country. Contact Tad Asbury to learn more about how you or your organization’s financial support can help transform the life of a young adult with disabilities through the power of a job.

Tad Asbury
Executive Director
(301) 380-7771
tad.asbury@bridgestowork.org

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