You First Episode 37: Investing in the Success of Employees with Disabilities

Maddie Crowley: On this episode of "You First," we'll explore the nuances and the world of employment and disability.

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Keith Casebonne: Hey there, I'm Keith, co-host of You First podcast, and welcome to the latest episode, All About Employment for People with Disabilities.

Maddie: I'm Maddie, the other co-host of You First. We have a great interview today featuring Neil Romano, a lifelong disability and employment advocate and a person with a disability himself. He brings a lot of knowledge and insight into this conversation.

Keith: Yes, indeed. I had a great time chatting with Neil. In today's episode, we will be touching on topics that use some academic or legal language that you may not know. In order to make sure we can all engage and enjoy today's episode, we're going to review some key terms.

Maddie: First, we have sheltered workshop or work centers. This is a segregated place where only people with disabilities work. People that work in sheltered workshops make less money than minimum wage.

Keith: Next up, we have the FLSA 14(c). FLSA stands for the Fair Labor Standards Act. Section 14(c) of this law allows employers to pay people with disabilities less than the minimum wage. We will also be talking about supported employment, which is support provided to individuals with disabilities before and during a job.

Resources such as job coaching, accommodations, and job training are all examples of supported employment.

Maddie: Kind of in that same idea, we will touch on Competitive Integrated Employment or CIE. People with disabilities have the same right as people without disabilities to work at a job that pays them minimum wage or more and in a place that has people with and without disabilities working together and provide chances to get raises and promotions.

Keith: We will talk about various trainings and opportunities for people with disabilities, including Adult Day Training programs, which are programs that provide adults with intellectual and or developmental disabilities with activities that will support them in all parts of their lives.

Examples of these activities could include computer skills training, art classes, recreational activities, interpersonal skill trainings, and more.

Maddie: Yes. Lastly, we will talk about students with disabilities and their transition to adult life after school. This is called transition planning. Transition planning is a process to help students

with disabilities decide what they want to do after high school. The purpose to help teens prepare to be independent young adults.

Keith: Great. Thanks for sticking with us as we went over those definitions. They will also be provided in the show notes to the episode, in case you'd like to reference them as you listen.

Maddie: With that, we hope you enjoy this episode of You First.

Keith: Hey, Neil. Thanks so much for being our guest today. Please tell us a little bit about yourself and how you got into this work.

Neil Romano: Keith, thanks a lot. I appreciate you asking me, and I'm delighted to be here this morning. I tell you what, I guess that I didn't get into this work. The work got into me. My entire life has been informed, when I look back on disability and issues in disability.

I am a person with dyslexia who has really dealt with that my entire life. It has been challenging, but it's also been helpful in some ways. Living with me, I had cousin with Down syndrome who lived with us most of my life. I got to see the value that she brought to the table.

As a person with dyslexia, I was always amazed that she didn't have to go to school, and I had to go to school. She was much brighter than me. I have a brother who recently passed who was a quadriplegic from the Vietnam War. My family was involved, a blue-collar family, was involved with a ministry, actually, in Florida, that was an international ministry to the blind and the deaf.

Really, growing up as a blue-collar kid in Brooklyn, they were the first, blind people were the first people with college degrees, educated people who ran large businesses that I knew. My whole life has been informed by it. A number of years ago, I started looking at the issue personally of work as it relates to people with disabilities.

Actually, I was just relating to someone. About 25 years ago, I gave a speech where I got booed, because I said the most important thing to people with disabilities is work. People challenged me and said, "No, no, no, it's not work, it's education."

I had quipped at that point. I said, "I have a guy with a PhD who's living on my couch who wish he had a job." I went around the country and started talking about work. Then I became involved in doing a national survey regarding people's perceptions of people with disabilities in the workplace. That would up becoming a film that I produced.

I was invited to the President's Committee on people with intellectual disabilities to talk about this issue that I've been working on for 10 years, and then I was invited to be the assistant secretary of labor for the United States Department of Labor, Office of Disability Employment Policy, and then I became the chairman of the National Council on Disabilities.

I have a business that is a marketing and promotion business that I do in sports, and I've taken every opportunity even there to work on disability issues. It's just been part of me my whole life in a positive way.

Keith: That's wonderful. We're really honored to have you here and bring your experiences to our podcast. As you know, there has been a lot of discussion over the past decade about sheltered

workshop, work centers, and supported employment as service models. A lot of the discussion is focused on the pros and cons of each model, and which is better of the two options.

Please share with us your thoughts and views about sheltered workshops, the FLSA 14(c) authorization, and supported employment. Is there a connection between these options? What would you say to those families who consider sheltered workshops appropriate for their family members?

Neil: I'll tell you what Keith, within there we have about 20 of the most important questions in this field.

Keith: It's a lot. It's a quick start.

Neil: Let's start with the basics on it. Sheltered employment is important to some people. It is a valuable option. However, sheltered employment at one point and for many, many years was really pretty much the only option. It's a very old option now. It's an option that has aged, and my only problem with the shelter deployment frankly is that I would like to see them get better, more inclusive with society.

The problem with sheltered work is that in and of itself, it's segregated from society. Quite honestly, what we have noticed over the last 25 and 30 years, as people with disabilities who are the same in many cases as the people in sheltered work become involved in competitive integrated employment. They grow, they get better, they do better, they earn more, they become part and parcel of the overall flow, giving them an opportunity for the future.

One of the greatest problems we have is we have a lot of parents who worry, and by the way rightfully. "What's going to happen to Billy after I pass, if he's had no exposure to the world if his exposure has totally been in a workshop?" Is he going to be able to navigate? Is he going to be able to take the bus? Has he been taught the skills he needs to get from here to there? It's a problem. Now, 14(c) of the "Fair Labor Standards Act" is extremely old. You're talking about a piece of legislation that was signed under Franklin Roosevelt.

Keith: Oh, gosh.

Neil: Let's give you a tiny bit of history on it. The first time it was challenged in the Supreme Court, it was found to be illegal, completely, to segregate and pay people less money. It originally was going to be used as a tool to get people with disabilities to work, but the other aspect of it was to help the southern states find another way to pay black people nothing, to pay them less for their labor.

It literally got thrown up by the Supreme Court, and then it was brought back as a training tool, 14C. You pay people less, so they couldn't call it employment anymore. We're going to pay people less because we're training them to go out into society and work. There are people who have been in those training programs for 20, 30, 40 years, and they never seem to get it.

The other thing is, it is probably one of the most glaring examples in society that would not be acceptable anywhere else, of government-supported segregation and discrimination.

I can't imagine any other population standing for the concept of, "We're going to pay you less. Not a little bit less. We're going to pay you 25 cents an hour. We're going to pay you a dime an hour. You're going to walk away after a 40-hour work week with a paycheck that could be 20 bucks."

That, in our society, in our time, is an absolute sin. A person should at least, if you work 80 hours, you should at least be able to buy yourself a pair of sneakers, go to McDonald's, take a couple of Uber rides to the movies with your friends.

When you don't pay people, when you do that, what you've also done is you have absolutely cemented them into a cycle of poverty that can never be broken. It is continuous.

The EEOC of the United States just recently, and I had the pleasure of testifying before them against 14(c), they said it is singularly discriminatory in every way. The interesting thing is both political parties, and this is not a political issue, but both political parties have in their platforms, "We should eliminate it." Let's eliminate. Let's get rid of it.

Keith: Let's do it. [laughs]

Neil: Let's just do it. Here's where we have to have a huge amount of respect for the parents, the parents of the children that are in these programs. You think of a parent as being a 35-year-old person with a 12-year-old kid. I'm talking about the 75-year-old parent who has a 55-year-old. All of a sudden, you say, "We're going to throw them out of there."

What the workshops that have 14(c) say is, "If they get rid of this, we're going to fire all of your kids," which proves exactly how caring and loving they are.

Keith: Of course. [laughs]

Neil: Instead of saying, "We're going to pay them," no, "We're going to fire them," which terrorizes the parents. In a very natural way, the parents who are automatically extremely protective will say, "What am I going to do with 55-year-old John?

"What am I going to do with Nancy? She's 57 years old. She has spent the last 30 years of her life here. Now, you're telling me you're going to throw her out?" The resistance from parents is always based upon fear. They never show the parents the kids that have left sheltered work, or that have left 14(c), who have achieved dramatically, not a little bit, dramatically.

There was a situation we know of. We had a group that was a very famous story about a turkey farm and da da da. These people were being paid less than five cents an hour as it worked out when they did the math on it and when the police was finally disbanded and everything.

I knew one of the workers who went to work for Walmart after 20 years working in this other place. He went to work at Walmart, became a forklift driver, was making $45 an hour a year later, and had a wife and family, by the way, because of it. He could support a wife and family, and he wound up having one.

All of these things would have never been considered. I call 14(c), and the use of it, a gulag of indifference. We always talk about it and people are horrified, Keith, and rightfully so, when we hear about someone who goes to prison because they were wrongfully accused.

In the case of 14(c), these are people who are sent to prison for the crime of having a disability or being slightly different. When we should be putting our energies into figuring out how to bring these people into the mainstream of society, not just for them, by the way, but for all of us, [laughs] for society. We need people in our workplace.

Keith: The issue is so intricate has so many different levels, and history, and ramifications behind the decisions that can be made. It's fascinating. Thanks for breaking that down for us. You also mentioned competitive integrative employment, so let's talk about that for a second.

The concept of competitive integrative employment and its supporting legislation does not address attitudinal barriers against employees with disabilities. Some non-disabled coworkers may question whether the "competitive component" of competitive integrative employment, or, in other words, the equal pay for equal productivity issue.

Even once a person with a disability obtains competitive integrative employment, they may face stigma and those attitudinal barriers in the workplace. What are your thoughts about that, and do you have any suggestions for people with disabilities, advocates, vocational programs, etc., to tackle issues such as those attitudes of coworkers?

Neil: That's a really, really good question, Keith. I can say with complete honesty, that question was answered almost 20 years ago to the affirmative for people with disabilities. A major national survey was done on the attitudes of people in the workplace who have worked with employees with disabilities in the workplace.

It was published in the "Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation" out of the Virginia Commonwealth University. It was considered a landmark piece. Here's what it said, and then I'll give you some background.

It said that 91 percent of all employees and employers who had worked with a person with a disability found them as or more, I'm saying as or more productive and valuable in the workspace as fully-abled employees. 91 percent, they found them to be honest, honorable, hardworking. [laughs]

They get there on time, leave on time. That, to me, is important, but the fact of the matter is that the guy next to them is saying, "They're working just as hard as me. They're doing just as hard a job."

The thing about that is you have the...A lot of times what employers worry about is the issue of accommodation as it relates to people in competitive integrative employment in the workplace. I absolutely detest the word accommodation in the workplace.

People say, "What? Neil [inaudible 16:55] if you work on this field." I hate it because the word accommodation connotes some form of favor or some form of opportunity that's different than you or I get. Let me ask you, Keith.

As an employee, does it make any sense as an employer, if someone comes to you and says, "I need a screen reader so that I can process what's going on in my computer as good as the guy who can see, because I want to do my work at 100 percent. I want to provide you with everything you need," is that an accommodation?

It is not. It's called a workplace enhancement. That's all it is. It's a productivity enhancement. It's my way of saying, "I want to enhance." Think of it this way. Today, if there is people replacing sewer pipes, and they went to their employer and said, "Hey, you know what? We're using hammers and chisels. There's a new thing called a power hammer."

How foolish is an employer to say, "Well, you use the hammers and chisels, because that costs too much. It costs too much to do that"? When the fact of matter is, all it really is is an opportunity to give a person to work at 100 percent capacity in your workplace.

As I've said to employers many, many times about this, what's your standard? Should some people be working at 10 percent, some at 50, some at 100, and some at 30? No. Your goal is to have everyone working at the same level and opportunity.

The whole issue of workplace, workplace standards, and how they're going to achieve in the workplace, we literally do not have that as a real issue anymore.

I know, for instance, the folks at Walmart, the only issue the folks at Walmart have ever raised about people with disabilities is that many of them are on this income cliff, where they can't work but 10 hours a week, otherwise they work beyond their benefits.

They can only work 10 hours a week. The issue has always been how sad, how terrible. These are great employees. We want them to work full-time. The sad part about it is, with the income cliff that people have, the sad part about it is these folks leave after 10 hours or so, and they want to be there.

They want to be there, and their fellow employees desperately want them there. That whole issue, and the issue of accommodation that surrounds the issue of stigma and everything is essentially no longer, is no longer believed by people who are doing it and people who are working at it.

There was recently another very large study done by Disability:IN, an incredibly good organization, and Disability:IN did a study with a major organization. They found that not only do people with disabilities compete, but they're just as productive, but they're also incredibly helpful to the bottom line.

By the way, that's important. The only way to sustain this is you have to believe that a person with a disability is going to support your bottom line. In the final analysis, as I say all the time, the business is just a stack of papers put together by a bunch of lawyers...

[laughter]

Neil: ...to make a profit for the business, for the shareholders, and so that salaries seem to work.

Keith: Let's talk about how those perceptions and cycles may start talking about students moving into transition and moving into the job force. There's the school-to-sheltered workshop pipeline, meaning sending students from school directly to sheltered workshops, which often starts with the high school students' transition plan.

Data show that when a plan includes a sheltered workshop as a work placement, it's inevitable that the student will transition to a sheltered workshop after graduation.

Under what circumstances should a sheltered workshop be a work placement for a high school student? Are there alternative models used in Florida or other states that you find effective? Of course, you've already talked a little bit about how a sheltered workshop is a trap, a jail. You'll be stuck in there for life.

What are some of the alternatives and ways that maybe this pipeline can be changed or even eradicated?

Neil: First of all, as I said, sometimes a sheltered workshop can be the right thing. It can be what somebody wants. It can be fully acceptable. The fact of the matter is that in probably most of the cases, it is not.

The problem is that we put entirely too much federal dollars into those kinds of programs without demanding, remember what their job was to do. What was their job? Their job was to transition them into real employment. We should be working harder to improve those workshops, make them more integrated, make them better.

There's a formula that says, I think it's a 75/25. 75 percent of the people in a sheltered workshop have to be people with disabilities, 25 percent people without disabilities. That, in and of itself, is weird.

That 25 percent of people who are "regularly able," one of the things I worked on very, very hard was a program to make sure that people with disabilities were considered for management jobs within the workshops.

Think about work in a place where every manager is not related to you at all, does not like you at all. The concept is to have more faith in the student, to prepare the student for the kind of job that they can get.

We're still in a mode where we do not prepare students to do it, nor do we show the kind of belief in the student that prepares them for the next job. It only prepares them for workshop, and quite frankly, a workshop is incredibly easy to get into. If you are the placement person and you want to get this case off your desk, there you go. There you go.

You can place that person in hours, as opposed to the time it's going to take you to get a person, have someone work with him, have a job specialist work with him, take him over to a grocery store, work with that person, do the training with him, do the basics, show them where the bathroom is, explain the protocols of the business.

That's hard work. We don't invest. It's a lack of investment in the people that we need to move America forward. What we do is we just say, OK, go over here, because it's simple, and because the people sometimes doing the placements don't have the imagination.

There's an organization, which you've probably heard of, called Project SEARCH. It has taken the exact opposite approach. They have taken young people in transition and work with them, figured out what their abilities are, but more important, figured out what their desires are.

It's interesting that a lot of these placements, they have only a certain number of things they can be doing. You're not even working with this young person to find out what it is they would like to do.

Now, as I said, there are some workshops that are absolutely remarkable now, and frankly, there's a bunch of places that they're paying their people well above minimum wage, doing really, really well. It has to do with looking at the pipeline at the beginning. It also has to do with what kind of jobs are out there What's the future in the economy?

Are we training these people, young people with disabilities, are we training them for those jobs. Frankly, we have the same problem with young people going to college. We can only use so many psychologists, although, I don't know, we could probably use more.

We do the same thing over and over again, instead of looking at the economy, seeing where we're going, looking at the stuff we're lacking. Why are we looking more into manufacturing? Why are we looking?

People begin stereotyping people early on. For instance, the whole thing now with people with autism and on the spectrum. Everybody assumes immediately that if that person is going to get a job, it's going to be in computer programming or something to do with computers, because they're strong with a structured area of numbers and blah, blah, blah, so they say.

No one will think of hiring a person with autism to do something else. That's the big push. We're really proud of ourselves. We've hired nine people with autism to work as coders. Great. That's fine, but that's not always the case.

I have a son-in-law, for instance, who is on the spectrum. He is a writer. He has his PhD in creative writing. He's going to be a professor this year. He's a gamer. [laughs] He does all this, but that is not the final bend in his life.

We should be spending more time looking at young people and asking them -- with disabilities -- what do you want to do, and believing that they can do something that they wanted to and doing that.

I had an opportunity to give a talk before about a thousand parents of kids with Down syndrome. We're talking about believing in their ability. When I was there, I asked everybody to raise their hand if they had a résumé for their young person.

They all raised hands when asked if they wanted a job. Everyone raised their hand. Yes, I want him get a job. Then I asked how many. Two out of a thousand people raised their hand if they had a résumé.

Keith: No kidding. Wow.

Neil: A résumé. When I questioned some of the other folks, they said, I took my son over to the supermarket, and I said he can only work about two hours a day or three hours a day. He can only do this and he can only do that.

I sat there, and all I could think was, can you imagine if you were going for a job, or I was going for a job, and what was listed on it was everything we couldn't do, all of our negatives. I can't do this. I can't do that.

I remember when I had a small advertising business, I had someone at the top of their resume, they said, "I really can't get up before noon." [laughs] I said, "Then you really can't have a full-time job."

[laughter]

Neil: It's about, are we looking at these young people as valuable people that can compete in an economy, and then looking at the areas in the economy where they can work, where they can help us?

We have all this new move towards working from home. Are we doing the kind of work for people that would give them the opportunity to work from home? Have we considered getting people ready to do things like phone bank work and things like that that we ship overseas when folks could do that right here at home and work on.

I'm just saying that as one potential thing. It breaks down to looking at the young person for what they can do and not what they can't do, and then finding the fit.

Keith: Those are great points and a good segue into my next question, which, honestly, you may have touched on some of the points you've just mentioned.

Under [inaudible 29:07] regulations, the Division of Vocational Rehab is expected to work collaboratively with school districts to prepare students with disabilities for transition to adulthood. What, in your view, should that collaboration look like to maximize the chances of a successful transition?

Neil: That collaboration should start by looking at the young person as an individual, looking at that young person and finding their strengths.

Working very, very hard to find their strengths instead of looking at that person, as I said, for what they can't do, and then pushing them into a slot that doesn't give them the opportunity to express themselves or grow.

Anything that we do that promotes any kind of segregation of young people with disabilities is a bad idea, because as I mentioned before, every time we ask these young people and people with disabilities to go into an environment and stretch and learn, they do.

There is a wonderful program with Marriott, where they teach young people how to be chefs, how to be cooks, young people with disabilities. I remember there was this one particular young man who had autism, and did not speak, and was nonverbal in large part, but a charming kid.

Always had a rigid smile on his face, but he also had a little problem with structure. He couldn't find his way around. I remember the manager of this particular program, because they go right to a hotel restaurant.

The manager of the program said, "The biggest problem we had with this young man was that he couldn't remember which floor the kitchen was on." He said, "We went and got a red dot and put it next to the elevator key for the floor he was supposed to be on."

He said, "100 of those red dots cost 50 cents. I only used one, and he could always find his way." That was his accommodation was something that cost less than a tenth of a penny. Then, what they reported, and the parents were stunned, he goes, starts working in the kitchen.

Within three months, he became partially verbal. He started being able to understand the words and he got pressed. He began to focus. Now, I recently heard about a couple of years ago, three or four. Everything is recent in my age.

I heard recently that he's now the head garnish chef at one of the largest Marriotts in the country. He's the guy who makes all the little garnishes for your plates when they put the little roses and the stuff on there.

He's a monster at it, and he teaches it. He was workshop-bound. That young man was workshop-bound. That young man was subminimum wage-bound. That young man today would still be floundering around. There you go.

Keith: That's a fascinating and good example of why, like you said, we should look at people as individuals and not just use labels or stereotypes. People with disabilities who are able to work can find themselves in a catch-22 per se, where if they make a certain amount of money, they may lose their benefits.

If the federal government ends up raising the minimum wage to $15, what effect would that have on public benefits such as SSI, SSDI, and Medicaid?

Neil: Let me begin by saying something that I have said many, many times. For people who are born with a disability, have a genetic disability of any type, or get a disability at a very young age, the fact that they would lose benefits at any income level is absolutely absurd. It makes no sense.

I have had conversations with some of the top economists in the country and asked them why. They smile and have absolutely no reason why that would be of any value to the American people or to the progress of this country. It's a punitive thing, and they always talk about waste, fraud, and abuse.

Keith, I've been in and around Washington for almost 40 years. Waste, fraud, and abuse is the punchline for just about every joke in D.C. As we print a trillion dollars that we don't know where half a trillion of it is right now, and we talk of [laughs] waste, fraud, and abuse.

The fact of the matter is I have been asked in public forums, how much should a person, for instance, where should their benefits be cut off if they have Down syndrome? Very honestly, I said, "Their benefits should be cut off when they start making their second billion dollars in one year."

The point being, there is no point to ever doing that, because all that does is it forces people into poverty. It forces them to make X amount of dollars a year and that's it. That could only be the hare-brained scheme of government. That is not the natural way business is done.

Even in the workplace, we offer healthcare. If a person gets healthcare, their benefits don't get cut if they make $100,000 more. It's nonsense. That's complete nonsense. To subject people with disabilities to that kind of rigorous and ridiculous problem doesn't make any sense at all.

When I first started on the President's Committee for People with Intellectual Disabilities many years ago, one of the things I did was I looked at all the legislation that passed for people with disabilities. What I noted was that whenever they talked about something for people with disabilities, it was a program.

Whenever they talked about something for any other group, children, students, women, whatever group, rightfully so, any time they talked about government money going there, it was called an investment, an investment.

When you talk about people with disabilities, it's simply a program. What does that mean? One's a black hole, and one, you believe you're going to get some of your money back from growing those people, the people's opportunities. It makes no sense that a person should be penalized for what they're making.

As I said, at Walmart, one of the greatest problems they had was people had to leave work after X number of hours. They had to leave work, because they would lose their benefits. What did that do? It caused the person, first of all, to not make enough money to really live. That's not enough money.

It caused the business to now have to hire four Joes, because he could only work 10 hours a week. He has to retain and hire four people to do that job.

The other thing is, that nobody thinks about is, if a person's on the job, and they're getting benefits -- they're getting $30,000, $15,000 worth of health benefits, and so on, and so on benefits, you're going to reach a point where they're probably paying almost as much taxes as their benefits.

Then they're going to reach a point, because they're going to keep growing in their job, where they're going to reach a point where they're going to go on someone else's benefits or someone else's healthcare, but we never give them the opportunity to do that.

No, no, no, we don't them down. Then here is this really sad, then what happens is you have some of these folks, and they wind up entering what I call the underground economy, because they can only make so much money legally.

Then they have to go and become criminals and earn money will people who will be happy to pay them $3 an hour for a job that they should be getting $15 an hour for. The worst of business and the worst of that person has to come out for them to make a few more dollars.

That's just absolutely inconceivable and makes no sense. Frankly, I'm talking as a person who cares greatly about the economy growth of the United States. I can't see any reason whatever -- I can't see one honest reason -- why a person, particularly with a genetic disability, someone who's born with a disability...

There'll be people who'll fight me and say, "Neil, it should be every person with a disability." Well, there are limits. A person with diabetes, yeah, I don't know, unless it's severe, they have to stay home, it's genetic, and they can't do anything about it.

I am saying, for people who we know, people who are born with physical disabilities, people who are born with severe sensorial disabilities, you have a situation where you can be smart enough to say, "We have a choice. We're going to let them enter the economy, be productive, and help us all out, because we have to have as much participation as possible, or we're going to just impoverish them."

Just impoverish them, and then, when they get older, and we have to put them in some kind of a place to live and stuff, then that'll cost us $150,000 and $170,000 a year, because they have no money of their own. We get to foot that bill later on, instead of letting them have enough of a life to be able to afford an apartment.

I know a young lady who worked at a place at Cincinnati Children's Hospital. She got a job through that group project, Surge, where she was working in the food court. Well, she was a superstar, an absolute superstar. She was so caring.

She would recognize in the food court if a mom had a baby. Children's hospitals are hard. She'd bring food to them and clear their plates for them, and that wasn't even her job. She worked behind, but she was very, very good. She got better, and better, and better, and better.

She wound up becoming a full-scale, full-time, full-benefit employee. I'd never forget the first time I met her, and she was so proud of her job. Then meeting her three years later, and she looked at me, and she said, "Mr. Neil," she said, "I have a chauffeur."

I said, "You have a chauffeur now?" She said, "Yeah, I have a chauffeur." What was happened was, in the interim, she had purchased an apartment, a small apartment in town, and she had a made a deal with a taxicab or an Uber driver that he came and picked her up at the end of her shift, picked her up in the morning, took her to work, picked her up.

Then, on the weekends, she had his phone number. She would call him and ask him to take her to the movies. She became a functioning human being, and she became out of a 14C environment. She was making less than minimum wage prior to that, no hope of any of that ever happening.

Keith: Interesting antidote. Thanks for elaborating on the benefit issue. You mentioned earlier that we don't think about services and supports for people with disabilities as an investment in their workplace or company, etc.

However, Florida's rules for adult-day-training programs specifically exclude "services directed at teaching specific job skills or meeting employment objectives of competitive employment in the general workforce." What do you think about this? Is that consistent with home and community-based-services settings rules and integrated employment?

Neil: Keith, I'm going to be very transparent here and tell you I don't really know the Florida rules and regs, as well as I, know the national ones, and even those, I'm a little bit weak on because I am a guy, [laughs] I'm not a wonk by any stretch of the imagination.

I can tell you that just by the very essence of that and understanding it, it is in and of itself, once again, a rule that appears to segregate people and to prevent them from finding their best abilities and life. It's just fairly obvious.

It has tied the hands of whoever those folks are running that program from, if they find that, like this young lady I was talking about who was a real problem working at a laundry. She was really bad, but she was a wonderful customer-service person.

You find someone's strength, but you can't help them get that job. You can't help them take a job making $15 an hour. They've got to be somewhere else. You've got to put them either in a 14(c) position or a workshop position. By the way, I separate those in many, many ways. It's just that it's just simply not fair. It's not only fair, but it's also discriminatory.

One would have to take a long look and wonder does that really work. I just always say to people is this what you'd want. Would you want to be told where to work, what hours, how to work without any consideration of you? You only get to pick from these five, or six, or seven opportunities. That's it. That's it.

You can go to this workshop somewhere and make sub-minimum wage, and what you're going to do for the rest of your natural life is separate hangers from dry cleaners. It's a function. It's needed. Is that what you want to do for the rest of your life? Do you ever want to be trained or taught to do something else? Do you ever want to change?

I don't think there's a human being that breathes that hasn't at one point in their life hoped for something a little bit better, for some form of advancement. Work, I always stress this too, work and the opportunity to make a couple of dollars is, in its essence, it's not just our, helps our personalities, but it also helps us to be able to express our love for others. That's desperately important to me.

I think about my children now, and they're successful, two successful young ladies. I think the greatest joy in their life is, I have one daughter that sends me cookies because she knows I like these particular cookies.

Without the income base to be able to send dad the cookies from Texas, she would not, it's an expression of her love. She doesn't have to write I love you, dad on the box or anything. I just know what she's saying.

I went to dinner with my other daughter recently, and she just, the joy in her face for the first time in her life to pick up the check. This is just as important for people with disabilities as it is for anybody.

Keith: That independence means so much, absolutely. Is there anywhere that people can learn a little more about this topic and stay informed about employment and disability?

Neil: I'm a member of the National Council on Disability. I was formerly the chairman. I'm now, still a member, proudly to be a member. It's a great organization. They can go to ncd.gov. If they want a deep dive into employment issues as it relates to disability, the Department of Labor's Office of Disability Employment Policy, or ODEP, O-D-E-P-dot-com, and you'll get a deep dive into just about everything disability and employment in the United States.

Keith: Perfect. Thanks so much, and thank you so much for being a guest today, Neil. We really appreciate it. We're honored to have you sharing your experience and knowledge in this area.

Neil: Keith, thank you very much, and thank you to Disability Rights Florida for leading the way on these issues. I really appreciate and respect you guys. Thanks a lot.

Keith: Same, thank you. Thanks again to Neil Romano for being a guest on our podcast today. We really appreciate him bringing us his expertise and insight about this issue.

Maddie: Definitely, and if you want to learn more about these topics, we will have links to more resources and information about our speaker and the topic in the show notes.

Keith: Also, be sure to subscribe to the podcast. We're on all the podcast platforms, Apple Podcasts, Spotify, Google, Amazon, YouTube, and many more. You can find us also on our website at disabilityrightsflorida.org/podcast.

Maddie: Thank you for listening to the You First Podcast or reading the transcript online. Please email any feedback, questions, or ideas about the show to podcast@disabilityrightsflorida.org.

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