



My Employment Journey

by Susan Frank

I got home the Sunday night before last in a panic. I was behind in my accounting homework; I still had not gotten started on writing this speech; I needed to do my grocery shopping and my laundry for the week. And I couldn't start any of this, because I was so stressed out that I was paralyzed. I thought, what right did I have to make a speech telling people about being successful at work when my own life was falling apart?!

As I recognized the beginning of the familiar descent into my own personal Hell, I made some decisions. I decided that I needed a little time off from the stress, and sat down with a favorite tape in my boom box. I decided that maybe dinner would help me cope a little better. Maybe I couldn't write my whole speech that night, but maybe I could write the first few paragraphs. And maybe, if there was time, I could finish one or two accounting problems before I went to bed.

As I noticed myself going through this process, it came to me that maybe I did have something to offer. Because it's this process of reframing and redefining your goals--meeting yourself where you are at that moment and deciding what you can do rather than focusing on what can't--that makes you able to go forward. That, for me, is really what success is about. That is what success is about for everyone, not just people with a mental illness, but maybe it is especially true for us.

At the time that I was referred to Yahara House, I was spending as much time in the hospital as out. I was reminded by someone at the clubhouse not long ago that his first recollection of me was of stepping over me as I lay crouched in the hall in front of my staff worker's door, waiting for someone to notice how much pain I was in and to please, please, fix it.

Moving on was a slow process. I began by finding things at Yahara House that I *could* do. Some days just sitting in the same room with the people in my unit was all I could handle. Some days, gradually more and more, I would help out by collating, working in the kitchen or typing a newsletter article. Yahara House didn't expect me to do any more than I could, but when I did have successes, they were happy to celebrate with me. That made me feel good, a feeling that was new to me, but that I liked.

But I might never have gone any farther than that if it wasn't for Beth. Beth was my staff worker, and I really liked her a lot. I took my first TEP, not because I wanted to earn money or work outside the clubhouse, but for a much more basic reason: Beth asked me to try. When she brought up the possibility, I could feel the butterflies in my stomach



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wake up, and the old familiar doubts and fears kick in. She asked me to try it for a week, with help from Marsha. She said she thought I could do it. And she said that at the end of the week we would go out for dinner to celebrate, if I stuck it out.

My goal at that point was not to finish six months on a placement. That seemed like too much to hope for, too long to wait. I was shooting for dinner with Beth on Friday.

Beth and I did have dinner that night, and it was great! Not only the dinner, but that Beth was proud of me--and that I was proud of me too! I had done something that I hadn't thought I could do, hadn't been able to do before that week, because I had enough support to give me hope and the courage to try.

To my surprise (and a lot of other people's too) I finished that six months as a typist at Isthmus newspaper. I tried some volunteer work and another TEP, which didn't work out for me, but along the way I learned about what kinds situations were hard for me to handle, and also what I was good at. I started to get more comfortable with people in general.

Then I got a TEP at the Memorial Union Accounting Office. Gus was my placement manager for that TE, and he struggled with me regularly over going to work every day. One thing he told me over and over was, "Don't give yourself a choice. As long as you're not physically sick, just GO!" I worked on that a lot those six months, and ended up that spring feeling pretty good about my job performance and my relationship with the people in my department.

That summer, I decided to look for a part-time job. I applied for many, but didn't find one until months later, when I was offered a job that I had found in the classified ads. I was a data entry operator at Associated Bank. The first month or so, I was on my best behavior. I showed up for work every day, and learned to do my job so that it was coming more easily to me.

Every night at 5:30 I would leave physically bone-tired, although I had only worked four-and-a-half hours. I couldn't believe at first that working half days would take so much energy, since I was good for hours of TV watching at home, no problem.

It seemed as if as the job itself got easier for me, I started having more attendance problems. I called in sick a lot the first few months, and I think the only thing that kept them from firing me was that I was good at my job--when I was there.

One day, after calling in sick with "the flu," my boss Jerry called me at home. I was scared of Jerry but as we talked, I began to understand that he was on my side. He told me very matter-of-factly that they liked my work, but they needed my attendance to



improve drastically, and could I think of a way to make that happen? The next day I brought him a written contract for us both to sign in which I said that I would be there every day for six months **NO EXCUSES!**

I kept that agreement but I won't kid you that it was easy. A couple of times I tried to call in sick, but Jerry wouldn't budge on letting me off. He said that my department needed me and I had better get my butt in to work or he was going to come and get me. I think he would have, too.

One of the problems with showing up on my bad days was that the pain I was trying to hide by staying home with the "flu" was now showing up at work, and I was deathly afraid that my co-workers would shun me because of it. But I learned, to my amazement, that they could put up with my tears and mood swings as long as I got my work done and they didn't have to cover my job as well as their own.

As they got to know me I began to feel that the pain of exposing myself was worth the risk, as people asked questions about how I was doing, and shared with me their own stories about family members or friends that had struggled with mental illnesses. George Bush was President that year and introduced the idea of a "kinder gentler nation." Imagine that!

After six months of perfect attendance I had learned Gus' advice, and no longer gave myself a choice about going to work. I just went. When our department expanded, I asked for full-time hours--and got them. That Thanksgiving, I had more to celebrate than a turkey dinner. I had health insurance, paid vacations, and a whole lot of self-respect.

This year I celebrated four years on the job, with two-and-a-half of them full time. Jerry has moved on to another bank. I miss him, but I don't need him to be there for me to get there and get my job done any more. Last year I decided to go back to school at night and on weekends to finish my bachelor's degree. I am finding that in the financial services industry there are new positions opening up, but most of them require a business degree. So instead of just taking classes, my work has given me direction for my studies.

This past year, the bank has acquired some new branches and my whole department has been stressed out about mergers and having to do more work with fewer people. It's been a real surprise to me that I've been able to handle it as well as anybody. I think the reason is that I've had a lot of practice learning to deal with stress. Whether it's internally or externally caused is almost irrelevant. I can fight it in the same ways.

One of the best things about working is that you have a chance to give back. After years of being a patient and having people do things for me or to me, I am now in control of



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what I give back and I want to make it something good. I let my co-workers know when I think they are doing a good job, because I've noticed that in the work place most people don't get feedback when they're doing a good job, only when they're screwing up. And I know from experience that a little support goes a long way.

I keep in touch with Yahara House because I miss the people. Also, while I am beginning to share more and more experiences with my co-workers, there are some things for which they just have no frame of reference. My doctor and I tried a med change this spring, and nobody at work understood about having to deal with a lot of physical and emotional side effects. It was a relief to go into Yahara House to talk without having to go through trying to make them understand what I was talking about. They just knew.

Sometimes I miss the safety and support of the clubhouse, seriously miss it. I get angry that I can't seem to find the energy for both spending time at the clubhouse *and* a full-time job. I'm mad about how hard it is sometimes. But I was talking to a friend about it a couple of days ago, and he asked me, "Would you go back to who you were when you first came to Yahara House?"

I just said, easily, because it's the truth, "No, I don't want to go back. Because I have more self-respect this way, and to me, it's come to be worth the trade!"

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