



## **ADA Live! Episode 98: America's Recovery: Powered by Inclusive Employment**

**Broadcast Date:** October 6, 2021

**Speakers:** Will Fried, Fort Hays State University; Trisha Baldwin, Visionworks, Inc.; Eren Denburg Niederhoffer; Michael Kipniss of the Piedmont Group of Atlanta; Jason Jones University of Kentucky Human Development Institute  
**Host:** Barry Whaley, Director, Southeast ADA Center

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**Will Fried:**

Hi, I'm Will Fried.

**Trisha Baldwin:**

Hi, I'm Trisha Baldwin.

**Eren Denburg Niederhoffer:**

Hi, I'm Eren Denburg Niederhoffer.

**Jason Jones:**

And I'm Jason Jones, and you're listening to ADA Live.

**4 Wheel City:**

Yo. Hi, let's roll. Let's go.

**Barry Whaley:**

Hi, everybody. On behalf of the Southeast ADA Center, the Burton Blatt Institute at Syracuse University and the ADA National Network, I want to welcome you to this episode of ADA Live. Listening audience, if you have questions about the Americans with Disabilities Act, you can use the online form any time at [adalive.org](http://adalive.org).

**Barry Whaley:**

The theme for National Disability Employment Awareness Month, or NDEAM, for this year 2021 is America's Recovery: Powered by Inclusion. It reflects the importance of ensuring that people with disabilities have full access to employment and community involvement during the national recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic. NDEAM is held each October to commemorate the many and varied contributions of people with disabilities to America's workplace and our economy.

**Barry Whaley:**

You can browse our website for ideas and [inaudible 00:01:37] employers, community organizations, state and local government, advocacy groups and schools, so that you can participate in celebrating NDEAM through events and activities centered around the theme, America's Recovery: Powered by Inclusion. In recognition and in celebration of this event, ADA Live is very pleased to welcome a panel of folks today to talk about their personal experiences in finding employment, making sure they have accommodation to do their jobs and the importance of employment and career to community inclusion.

**Barry Whaley:**

Our guests today are Will Fried, Trisha Baldwin, Eren Denburg Niederhoffer and Jason Jones. I want to welcome you all to the show. I think probably the obvious place to start is to talk about your job or your career. I'm going to start with Will. Will, can you tell us a little bit about how you come to be working at Fort Hays State College?

**Will Fried:**

I came to my current role as the graduate assistant in accessibility services at Fort Hays State University from being an undergraduate student advocate during my four years at Salisbury University in Maryland, where I was constantly advocating for change for students with disabilities. Because I saw the struggle of students with disabilities at the college level, having to navigate advocating for themselves for the first time.

**Will Fried:**

Because when students with disabilities transition from high school to college, not all their accommodations are given to their instructors, and it adds an added barrier. And I started to become passionate about advocating as a person with a disability for myself. And I learned during my college experience that I could be doing for this as a career to help other students with disabilities succeed at the college level.

**Barry Whaley:**

Great. Thanks will. Jason, why don't you talk a little bit about your work and how you came to do it?

**Jason Jones:**

Well, I mean, my work found me, instead of me finding my work. I was injured in a track meet in high school at age 15 and sustained a spinal cord injury, a high level C4 which I'm paralyzed from the chest down, basically. So, the advocacy thing started early and that led to early on, I went to college, graduated with a degree in mass communications. And thought I was going to go into the world of media.

**Jason Jones:**

And I did for a little while. Did some stuff with newspapers and television for a couple years. And then worked for a couple of marketing firms. Then, the Office of Vocational Rehabilitation, or as we call it OVR. OVR came calling and said, "We're looking for somebody to do those things for us." And I ended up going to OVR.

**Jason Jones:**

And basically, at OVR, I went in thinking I was going to be the public relations person. And that was a part of my role for many years, but bigger than that, I really morphed into being immersed in the disability community and the advocacy side and the mentoring side of things. From there, I ended up now at my current position at the University of Kentucky Human Development Institute. And have really been able to spread my wings even a little bit more and get into some of those areas that have always been of super interest to me, especially with the mentoring side.

**Barry Whaley:**

Let's turn to Trisha next. Trisha, why don't you tell us about your work?

**Trisha Baldwin:**

Okay. I work at Visionworks, which is a vision optometrist around the country. There are about probably 90 or more Visionworks in the United States. And my store is one of the busiest stores in the United States. I work as a receptionist, a pretester. And also, I work in dispensing, sometimes dispensing glasses and also putting up glasses.

**Trisha Baldwin:**

I came into the job with no expectations of what I would be doing, how much I would be doing or how much I would be moving around. I move around pretty much all day because for a minute, they have me in pretest and then they'll have me in reception. And then they'll tell me to go to dispensing to help dispensing. And then they will tell me to hop back over to reception. So, it's pretty active.

**Barry Whaley:**

Trisha, prior to working at Visionworks, you also were involved in a mentorship opportunities. Right. In college.

**Trisha Baldwin:**

Yes. Yes. Yes, I was.

**Barry Whaley:**

Yeah. Tell us about that.

**Trisha Baldwin:**

I mean, the internship was pretty fun and pretty relaxing to do, but it was interning at WDRB as a pretty much watching and learning how to use the cameras, how to edit the videos, thing about the TV station. One week, they would have me in watching people edit. One week, they would have me in watching people with the sound. In different weeks, they would have me in different areas of the WDRB.

**Barry Whaley:**

And that's a television station in Louisville, right?

**Trisha Baldwin:**

Yes, sir.

**Barry Whaley:**

Okay. And finally, let's turn to Erin. Eren, tell us about your work.

**Eren Denburg Niederhoffer:**

I don't work specifically for a company. I work for a supervisor/team leader at said company. The Piedmont Group of Atlanta, which is basically a financial services firm. And by financial services, insurance, investments, annuities, et cetera. I handle data mining and social media marketing projects. I came to have this job, thanks to Briggs & Associates, a job employment agency that works in Georgia.

**Eren Denburg Niederhoffer:**

Basically, a now retired job coach found my current employer at a job hunting event at a church. The church was holding a job hunting event where the employer was looking for summer interns. She convinced him to hire me, a person with autism, full-time in a position that would regard data analysis. I had five interviews with said employer, where I have researched the company, researched the role and researched the field.

**Eren Denburg Niederhoffer:**

The employer said that if I could get an insurance license, he would hire me. I passed the insurance license on the first go. And then got nearly fired in the first week, because what an unspoken rule, something that people with disabilities, especially cognitive and developmental disabilities need to learn, is office professionalism. And that was something I struggled with, but that job coach came through for me and encouraged my boss to give me a second chance.

**Barry Whaley:**

Eren, you mentioned how in that first week, you almost got fired.

**Eren Denburg Niederhoffer:**

Well, technically I did. I worked for the company, got fired and now I work for my boss who works for the company.

**Barry Whaley:**

I gotcha. Let me ask. And I'll start with you, Eren, since you and I are chatting. What sort of barriers other than what happened that first week, are there other barrier you encountered in finding work or keeping a job?

**Eren Denburg Niederhoffer:**

Well, when you have disabilities, you're held under a magnifying glass. Employers will think that your accommodations or your disability may mean you're a drain on resources,

or that you may be productive. You basically got a chip on your shoulder. You have to prove something.

**Eren Denburg Niederhoffer:**

You have to basically show that you are just as competent and as useful as the non-disabled individuals. I think one of the barriers is the basically, to get the accommodations that we need. Accommodations are a barrier. You have to find a way to show these potential employers that's your accommodations.

**Barry Whaley:**

Jason, what sort of accommodations do you have in order to do your job?

**Jason Jones:**

Well, I mean, I think one of the biggest things right now of course, is the work at home accommodation of just for my own safety and obviously, for the safety of my family. And most of us have gotten that accommodation over the last year or so. But I use tons of assistive technology. Over the years, I've asked for everything from accessible camera equipment to ways to interface with the public through telephone systems, those kinds of things.

**Jason Jones:**

I use some pretty antiquated equipment, but it's always been provided for me. And software obviously, is a big issue. And over the years, I've had things, like getting up in the morning can be a long process, sometimes going into a couple hours. Adjusting a work schedule to make it either more project-based or instead of working 7:30 to 3:30, or maybe 9:30 to 5:30, those kinds of things.

**Jason Jones:**

I would say the most important thing I've done is to enter into that interactive process. And we talk a lot about it in ADA trainings and stuff, but it's so important to develop that

relationship. I think Eren alluded to it a minute ago with just having a good communication system with your supervisor and your boss. And being able to break out those barriers that may rear their ugly head at times.

**Barry Whaley:**

Thanks, Jason. What about Trisha? Trisha, have you encountered barriers in getting a job or keeping a job?

**Trisha Baldwin:**

Well, what happened to me is well, I was hired on part-time to do part-time at Visionworks and it only took me maybe a few months. A few months later, my boss came up to me and noticed how much of a hard worker I was. So he gave me a full-time job at Visionworks as just doing the same exact thing that I was doing, pretest, to reception and dispensing. And he just knew how hard I was working there that I could be working for a full time.

**Barry Whaley:**

Very good. Yeah. Thank you. Hard work paid off, huh?

**Trisha Baldwin:**

Yes, sir.

**Barry Whaley:**

Yeah.

**Eren Denburg Niederhoffer:**

I just want to interject, I think it's notable. I'm not saying it's a good thing about our disability, but a lot of employers seem to have claimed that people with disabilities, development or otherwise, seem to have a stronger work ethic than a lot of people

without disabilities. And I just noticed that they seem to be gravitating towards us for that reason among others, and willing to hire us or promote us.

**Barry Whaley:**

Yep. Good point. That's a good point. ADA listening audience, if you have questions about MD, this topic or any other ADA live topic, you can submit your questions online at [adalive.org](http://adalive.org), or you can call the Southeast ADA Center at 1404-541-9001. And now, a word from this episode's sponsor.

Speaker 7:

October is National Disability Employment Awareness Month or NDEAM. The purpose of NDEAM is to educate the public about disability employment issues and celebrate the many and varied contributions of America's workers with disabilities.

Speaker 7:

Held annually, National Disability Employment Awareness Month is led by the US department of labor's Office of Disability Employment Policy, ODEP. But its true spirit lies in the many observances held at the grassroots level across the nation every year. Employers of all sizes and in all industries are encouraged to participate in NDEAM. For specific ideas about how you can support National Disability Employment Awareness Month, visit [www.dol.gov/ndeam](http://www.dol.gov/ndeam).

**Barry Whaley:**

Welcome back. We're continuing our conversation with Will Fried, Trisha Baldwin, Jason Jones and Eren Denburg Niederhoffer. And we're talking about what has helped you to be successful at your job and barriers you've encountered. The last year and a half, two years, it's been really tough with the pandemic. And I'm wondering, and I'll start with Will, how has the pandemic affected your job.

**Will Fried:**

With working in accessibility services at Fort Hayes of State University, I've been fortunate to be able to work in person since last year when I have started, but with this pandemic, the one thing that was different was that more students with disabilities were taking exams online.

**Barry Whaley:**

We're doing some traveling, I remember, at some very difficult time. I'm glad you stayed safe. Trisha, has the pandemic affected your employment at all?

**Trisha Baldwin:**

It hasn't really affected it. It's just we don't have a lot of customers coming in, but we do sanitized and also clean after each customer. So, the machines we clean and sanitize after each customer. The doctor's rooms, we sanitize and clean after each customer. And it just hasn't really been an issue. But some people do walk in and they're like, "We have our vaccine." And I'm like, "Well we're still a medical facility. So we do require masks in our facility." And they're like, "That's crazy." And we just have to tell them, "If you don't want to wear it, you don't need to be here."

**Barry Whaley:**

Yeah. Your experience is a little different Trisha because I mean, you guys are an essential service. Right. Without glasses, a lot of us are at a tremendous disadvantage. Eren, how has the pandemic affected you and your work?

**Eren Denburg Niederhoffer:**

I technically come into the office twice a week to report in, pick up assignments, meet with the team. Job was not impacted negatively. I do meet with team less and less because some of them are trying to avoid COVID. But the work I do allows us to do Zoom phone call, email and other stuff. Because my work is more computer based and say, less manual labor, less meeting someone for coffee, or lunch, or boardroom meetings. I have a safe work in a computer environment from home.

**Barry Whaley:**

Right. And Jason, I know that you have always had a work from home option, but are there other ways that the pandemic has affected the work that you with regards to training or technical assistance?

**Jason Jones:**

Yeah. I mean, I think one of the biggest things and I work closely with you, Barry, is the thing that I miss the most is that ability just to jump down the hallway and talk to three or four people and get a cohesive idea or approach to something that we're trying to tackle. That's been more difficult. But we had already pivoted so much early before the pandemic to a lot of online Zoom meetings, those kinds of things, because at the Human Development Institute, we work with a lot of people from other states. I mean, people on this call are good examples.

**Jason Jones:**

And people are employed. We have people that work for HG in Atlanta and Indianapolis and all parts of the state. So, we had already, we were trailblazers, I think in that. I think we've actually been maybe more efficient over the last year or so. But I think the most difficult thing is that the community, people with disabilities and people who were the stakeholders and those I would call maybe the helpers or the people that are really trying to get out there and make a difference.

**Jason Jones:**

We seem to be a little stronger when we can sit down, bounce ideas off each other and that kind of stuff. And not being able to be in a room together has been probably the most difficult. But as far as being efficient, I think we've done pretty well.

**Barry Whaley:**

Yeah, it's that informal collaboration is the greatest thing I think that we have lost.

**Jason Jones:**

Yes.

**Barry Whaley:**

I'm going to stay with you. And this is really a question I've always wanted to ask you. Can you tell me who or maybe what was the biggest influence in your life in moving toward your employment goals?

**Jason Jones:**

The easy answer here is my parents. Just because they always instilled in us a work ethic, me and my sister and my brother, that said you're going to grow up, you're going to go to college. You're going to get a job. Kathy Williams and Sam [Serigly 00:20:50] I work at the Office of Vocational Rehabilitation, early on were two significant figures in the person that I've turned out to be as an advocate and as a professional.

**Jason Jones:**

I would say Tom Gravitt, who I consider my mentor, another person with a spinal cord injury. I saw him working. I saw him get up every day and I saw him do the things that he needed to do. I met him in rehab when I was 15 years old and thought, "Hey, here's a guy that looks like me and has a lot in common with me and is I'm doing all the things that I want to do."

**Barry Whaley:**

Will, how about you?

**Will Fried:**

Yeah. I've been very fortunate to have some very supportive professors during my time as a student at Salisbury University who have pushed me to go above and beyond. And it started during my sophomore year in college with the distinguished professor in the department of Conflict Analysis and Dispute Resolution, Dr. Thomas Boudreau, who had

me do a policy proposal. And it was more related to changing classes around to be more inclusive to individuals with disabilities.

**Will Fried:**

And he's someone that grew up as being deaf and didn't speak until he was age five. And he is someone that really appreciated my work and told me how brilliant I was. And at that time, I was trying to figure out what I really wanted to do with my career, as well as getting the opportunity to be taught by Dr. Dean Ravizza, who's one of the top internationally known adapted physical educators in the country. In a really incorporated and talk and putting more about adaptation theory to push my disability of advocacy forward. And telling me I didn't have to hold myself short in having ability. And really pushed me and joked with me because he knew that I could do well.

**Barry Whaley:**

Thanks, Will. Trisha, how about you?

**Trisha Baldwin:**

Yeah. My parents have really been an advocate, have really been the help to me. And also, my swim team. They were encouraging me. They knew I wanted to work. And they were encouraging me to just pursue a job, any job that I wanted to do. And then I thought, "Well, I could work as a retail person." And then I was like, "Well, I know someone that works there and they might help me with finding a job." I was like, "Okay, I'm going to try that route first."

**Barry Whaley:**

Right. That's always very helpful, knowing somebody. Eren, how about you? Do you have somebody or something you think is a big influence in reaching your employment goal?

**Eren Denburg Niederhoffer:**

Besides my mom and my current boss. As a child to adulthood, I had little to no friends, couldn't drive till I was 25, had little to no social skills or applicable skills whatsoever. The biggest influence was my desire to be somebody, to be something, to do something, to gather leading in my life. I was so frustrated with the situations that the influence led me to have a desire to improve myself, constantly learn new things, try new things, expand my mindset, abilities in life.

**Eren Denburg Niederhoffer:**

I guess the biggest influence was my desire to change my life to one that I could be proud of, rather than hate it. And well, I drive now, I was able to keep a relationship for three years. I'm able to hold onto a job for three years. I have friends. And well, I'm here right now. I guess sometimes, not many people may think of it this way, but if you are willing, but if you convince yourself to do something, you can be your own biggest influence. So long as a few people who aren't necessarily that big influence, give you a little push or encouragements.

**Barry Whaley:**

That's very good. Earlier we had mentioned accommodation. And Jason, you had mentioned the interactive process. Let me start with Jason. How do you think the ADA has had an impact on the employment of people with disabilities?

**Jason Jones:**

Well, I think probably a little more on a macro level, the ADA has had an influence because of just the ability to see disability. I was injured the year that the ADA was signed. I don't have as much of a concept of what it was like before, but I have seen what it has become over the past 30 plus years.

**Jason Jones:**

And I think that society's acceptance of disability, although nowhere close to where it could be and absolutely not where we want it to be, it has morphed into more of we see people with disabilities and we see people with autism. We see people who are deaf and

blind, and we see people with physical and mental disabilities, intellectual disabilities. And so, I think overall in society, it gives us a little more perception that, "Okay, we're all the same. We are a diverse group." And I think ultimately, that helps in employment.

**Jason Jones:**

Now, employment provisions in the ADA, obviously, have done so much to create a more equal process. When we talk about the ADA and I say it all the time, it's like, it's from the time you walk in the door, or roll in the door, or however you get in the door, as far as everything needs to be accessible all the way through to that last part where whether or not you get the job. When disability does not have to play a significant role in that decision for that employer, it makes a big difference and it definitely levels of playing field. I'm proud, of how far we've come and I'm saddened by how far we have to go.

**Barry Whaley:**

Yes, very well said. Will, how about you? How's the ADA been beneficial to people finding work?

**Will Fried:**

Yeah, I feel like the ADA has definitely made buildings more accessible for people with disabilities since 1990. And incorporating wheelchair ramps has been allowing people with disabilities to get employment because there's wheelchair ramps. As well as sign language interpretation, being accommodated for individual who are deaf and hard of hearing. That's, I mean, been a big thing because it's something that they need in order to succeed. As well as being inclusive of screen readers for folks who are blind and visually impaired.

**Will Fried:**

And the one thing that definitely has helped the ADA build is definitely being more aware of universal design to go above and beyond the ADA for folks who have disabilities. As well as incorporating the disability justice framework, which was created by Sins Invalid, which is a disability performance group that does a lot of activism.

**Will Fried:**

And especially, utilizing the principle called collective access, which we need to do more, that individuals with disabilities have different needs that might be going above and beyond. They might need a more comfort spaces for them, more decompression, because the intersection of mental health and disability and trauma needs to be aware of. And we have to, so as a society, realize that anybody can acquire a disability at any time in their life. And that disability is the largest minority group because of that. It's still something that society has to believe. We have to keep on changing the attitudinal barriers about this.

**Barry Whaley:**

Will, one of the things that we say at Burton Blatt Institute, we are all just temporarily able. Right. Eren, what about, how has the ADA helped people find work and become employed?

**Eren Denburg Niederhoffer:**

Given how the workforce can be extremely close-minded and may not necessarily listen to people with disabilities, but may listen to job coaching agencies, job coaches, or organizations that have been recognized by groups like ADA. I would say Briggs & Associates has been proved that ADA has managed to achieve impact in allowing people with disabilities to hold onto their positions.

**Eren Denburg Niederhoffer:**

It's one thing to get a job. Holding onto it, improving it, that can be a lot harder. And I think ADA has played a huge role in allowing for job retention, job promotion, and especially accommodations for people with disabilities. I would not be where I am today without a good part of what ADA has done for me.

**Barry Whaley:**

Do you have anything to add Trisha?

**Trisha Baldwin:**

Yeah. I just think ADA is a good program because a lot of people don't understand that people with disabilities can work as hard as people without disabilities and work as much as people without disabilities do. A lot of employers don't understand that. And think when people with disabilities come in, they're like, "We're not going to hire her because she has a disability." But sometimes they do hire people because they think they could be a good candidate.

**Barry Whaley:**

That's an excellent point. Let's wrap this up and I want to ask you guys each a question and if you can answer it in just one sentence. Okay. If that's possible. Do you have any advice in one sentence for somebody just starting a job search or a career? Jason.

**Jason Jones:**

Man, you say one sentence, that makes it difficult. If I had advice, I guess it would be, look for something that's going to suit you and the person that you're working for well, regardless of disability and enter into that interactive process as soon as possible.

**Barry Whaley:**

How about you, Eren? One sentence, advice for somebody.

**Eren Denburg Niederhoffer:**

One, do not burn bridges between any groups of people. Be neutral on politics and religion. And get a minimum of six hours of sleep. Use only one to two cups of coffee per day.

**Barry Whaley:**

Excellent.

**Eren Denburg Niederhoffer:**

That will not only help you in terms of getting potential jobs through your network, but also holding on to them. Let me just cap off my sentence by saying, it's not just what you know that will help you get your job. Who you know can be just as, or even more important.

**Barry Whaley:**

Good advice. Thank you, Eren. Trisha, you have a bit of advice?

**Trisha Baldwin:**

Mine is you can do whatever you put your mind to. Even if you don't think you could do something, you could always just try it. And if you fail, you get up and try again.

**Barry Whaley:**

That's always great advice. Will Fried, you have the last word.

**Will Fried:**

As Ed Roberts would say, just go out there and change the old attitudes.

**Barry Whaley:**

Perfect. Perfect way to end. I want to thank you. Will, Jason, Eren, Trisha. And I want to thank our ADA Live listening audience for joining us for this episode. To access ADA Live episodes, visit our website at [adalive.org](http://adalive.org). All those episodes are archived with streamed audio, accessible transcripts and resources.

**Barry Whaley:**

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**Barry Whaley:**

ADA Live is a program of the Southeast ADA Center. Our producer, Celestia Ohrazda with Beth Miller Harrison, Mary Morder, Emily Rueber, Marsha Schwanke, and me, I'm Barry Whaley. Our music is from 4 Wheel City, The Movement 4 Improvement. We'll see you next episode, everybody. Be safe.

**4 Wheel City:** (rapping)

[End of Transcript]

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