



# Educational Spotlight

[www.abilitiesfirst.net](http://www.abilitiesfirst.net)

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“Independent Living”

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**empower: abilities/ (417) 886-1188**

**Steven Wright, Transitions Manager, [swright@swcil.org](mailto:swright@swcil.org)**



**Favorite Movie:** I don't really have just one favorite movie; I like movies in general; I am fond of Marvel.

**Favorite Hobbies:** Motorcycles, specifically riding Harleys. Road trips, traveling, history, art and fishing.

**Hometown:** Born and raised in KC MO but my grandparents and great grandparents stem from Sparta, Fordland, Cabool areas. I've been in and around the Springfield area since 1990.

**How long have you been at empower: abilities and what is your role there?**

I've been at empower: abilities for 6 years this March. I'm the Transitions Manager. I work with several Independent Living Specialists who assist in transitioning qualified individuals out of nursing homes and back into community-based living. We help find housing, set up necessary supports, Primary Care Physician, pharmacy, DME (Durable Medical Equipment), In-Home services, Consumer Directed Services, furnish the home, financial assistance, provide 1 year of case management, monthly visits during that year and independent skills training. We connect them with skills training, and necessary medical, social, and community supports they will need to live their best independent life. The goal is to teach the individual throughout the year how to utilize all community, state and federal services offered that can assist them in maintaining their independence.



**What do you like best about your job?**

What I like best about my job is seeing the satisfaction of someone with a disability as they come to realize that living independently and having a life in the community is in their grasp. To see them as they regain or maintain their independence through any of the various services provided by empower: abilities makes working here very rewarding. Knowing that every day you work is a day that you have the ability to change someone's life for the better, is an amazing thing. My coworkers, our team, is what makes all I do

successful. Without our various departments working together, what I do for clients just wouldn't happen. They're all great and they make my job a very outstanding experience.



### **Who or what helped you the most with where you are now in your life?**

My faith and my acceptance of and desire to move beyond my disability to pursue the life I wanted to have. These led me to the programs, state and federal, to assist me to regain employment, come off of SSDI, and regain a life of independence. My family and friends have all been there at various times and ways throughout the last 12 years to assist in my ability to maintain my independence.

### **How did you reach your goal of independent living?**

I reached my goal of independent living through two primary entities, empower: abilities, a CIL (Center for independent Living) and a Medicaid grant program, MFP (Money Follows the Person). It was empower: abilities who was responsible for my transitioning from the nursing home back into community- based living, through the MFP program. Those two things opened the broad door to options and opportunities. One option came through a federal program that assists people who want to work while on SSDI or who want to work and come off of SSDI. That program is called "Ticket to Work." This program allowed me to work part-time without losing my health benefits through Medicare and continue receiving SSDI. Once a full- time position was offered it gave me the means necessary to come off of SSDI and be independent of that as well.



### **Why is it helpful for families to know about Social Security, MO Health Net or DD services or benefit planning?**

Knowing about the programs offered through Medicare, Medicaid and Social Security is a must. To be able to adequately plan to live independently now, as well as to plan for your future, it is best to know what programs are in place that are specific to your needs. From my personal experience, I can assure you that there are many people who don't experience living independently simply due to not being aware of programs set in place to assist them in doing so. Knowledge and awareness are key: if you don't ask, you'll never know. There are programs to assist with health insurance and financial goals.

### **How can technology or home modifications help someone function better or be more independent in their home?**

Ramps, home modifications and assistive technology is the key to a broad door. An individual could use that key to open that door, which while closed, is the barrier preventing him/her from one or more aspects of their ability to do something for

themselves. Once that door is unlocked though, it's a life changer. Whether it be accessing their own home, mobility, feeding themselves, returning to work or school, using their phone, being able to drive and many, many, more things, Assistive Technology is enabling people to be more independent.



### **Is it important for families to consider how their family member will access their community?**

It is important to consider how a family will be able to get around the community as an adult or as an adult with a disability. Many times, I find people who retire to areas, while in good health, who don't consider their future health decline. They move to an area without public transportation or a rural area far enough from a city that if home and community-based services were needed, finding a provider who could staff them is difficult or near impossible. It's also wise to consider if the community has sidewalks in place to enable access around the area. Are there healthcare provisions in the community and if not, how far must an individual travel to see a doctor? Is transportation available? What support services does that community offer? All things to consider prior to deciding to live somewhere.



### **What is supported decision making? And what are some supported decision-making practices that will keep someone safe without restricting their basic rights?**

Skills that would allow an individual to not necessarily need a guardian would include being able to manage their own care and making their own medical decisions. Knowing how to schedule appointments and rides to see doctors or for treatments. Knowing how to budget and pay their own bills.

*“Steve embodies what we are all here to do at empower: abilities: to remove barriers and empower independent living for all people with disabilities!”*

*-Allison Robertson MSW, MHA,  
Program Director, empower: abilities*



## **Miranda K.**

### **Tell us a little about yourself:**

I am currently living in Independent Supported Living with a housemate that I have lived with before, we have been housemates off and on for 18 years. We had lived together when we were younger and are housemates now. I went into Foster Care when I was about 10 years old and have lived in a lot of foster homes and group homes in Springfield and St. Louis. When I was younger, I enjoyed riding horses and was thrown off of one and kicked in the head and got a Traumatic Brain Injury.

### **Favorite Hobbies:**

I enjoy reading mystery books on my kindle and playing sports in the summer time. My favorites are bowling and volleyball. I participate in Sporting Chance and volunteer with track. My favorite tv shows are Chicago PD, Law and Order SVU and Law and Order, Chicago Fire and Chicago Med.

### **Hometown:**

I was born in Springfield, Illinois and moved to Nixa with my grandparents. When I was 5 my parents built a home in Highlandville. I have lived in Springfield and St. Louis.



### **Are you employed?**

I work at a Taco Bell about 20-30 hours a week. I am supposed to work part time, but they call me in often. The lobby is closed right now, so I take orders and work the cashier window and work the fry stations. (We have the seasoned French fries back with Nacho cheese!)

I have a great managers who are super nice. Sometimes I forget to remind the customer about the survey on the back of their receipt, but I understand my job and am very fortunate to get to do a lot of tasks. I have been here a year May 13<sup>th</sup>. Before this, I worked at Waffle House, but Covid hit and I was only there a month. I found these jobs on the my own. If I was to work at another job that was more fast paced, I may need some support with a job coach.

### **What advice would you give someone looking for a job?**

If someone is struggling to find a job, look at employment providers to fit their match. If a job looks too hard, tell them, tell them what you like and what you don't like. Job coaches can be a big help to show you what you need to do correctly. They won't follow you around, they will be taking notes and be there as a support. They help you stay

focused and do things in order. They are not there to hover over you, but you need to listen to them and ask questions.

### **Who or what helped you most with living your good life?**

My staff who come into my home to help me. I have a guardian and I also receive services with The Next Step, Abilities First and have a Support Coordinator, Dedra, who is part of my team. She is awesome! I want to become my own guardian in the future and have overcome a lot, so I am working toward that goal.

### **Have you had challenges along the way?**

Living in Foster Care and losing my parents. I am the youngest of three girls. We also lost our grandmother. I used to have a bad temper when I came here, I still forget some things. But my outbursts have decreased, I have improved so much and don't have these anymore. When I get mad or irritated now, I try to wait this out and use my coping skills and talk these things through with my staff. I go on walks and listen to Pandora on my phone.

### **What words of encouragement do you offer others on reaching their goals?**

Don't give up! Be inspired! It will eventually come. Share your dream with someone you are close with and maybe they can help you also. I use different colored post-its and write my goals down and check these off. I post these everywhere so I can see them each day and be reminded of them! If you have support staff, try to listen and voice your concern but don't argue with them. They are a great support and talk to them. They are there to take care of you and protect you.



### **What are your personal goals for the future?**

Becoming my own guardian eventually, living on my own with less staff. Getting to see my sisters more often and working towards spending overnights with my sister and niece and nephew. I would also like to learn the city bus eventually.

*"Miranda has grown so much in the past 5 years. Miranda had a vision for her life and she strives hard to make that vision a reality. She is successfully employed, and now she is setting goals to gain more independence. Miranda is a positive role model for all of her peers."*

*-Kari Jones, Branch Director of Help At Home, LLC.*



## Conrad S.

### Tell us about yourself, what is your favorite movie? Favorite hobbies?

I am knowledgeable about animals and hunting and I have a great job. My favorite movie is The Lion King. My hobbies are hunting, fishing, golfing at Highland Springs and watching Nascar. My favorite car is the Bubba Wallace car owned by Michael Jordan, one of my heroes.



### Hometown

I am from St Louis originally but my family and I moved to Springfield, Mo when I was 2 years old.



### Are you employed?

Yes, I am employed at Wonders of Wildlife. I work in the education department as a guest engagement guide. I educate people on the animals in the area I am working, as well as answer questions and assist tours. Middle and High School students are my favorite to work with. I also enjoy teachers and principals that visit with the school groups.



### Who or what helped you the most with where you are now in your life?

My parents helped me the most by supporting me. My dad will call me before work and remind me to “keep my head in the game”. I love sports and Michael Jordan is my hero. This kind of support helps me to be successful.

### What obstacles have you overcome?

I have learned to use my head at work. My job coach taught me about “gentle teaching” which reminds me that I can handle working with a lot of different people without it feeling like it is too much to handle. I also have tools from my job coach like a pre-shift ritual and a schedule so that I know what to expect from day to day.

### Do you have any words of encouragement to give others who want to work and live out on their own?

Carl Weathers said something in Rocky that I like to share, “Stay in school, run from nobody or nothing. Don’t let fear stop you from doing what you love.”

## What are your goals for the future?

I want to keep doing my best and improving here at Wonders of Wildlife. I wouldn't mind to work toward another career with animals in the future like working on an animal attraction or production.



**Conrad's supervisor (pictured) is Sarah Anderson, Education Manager at Bass Pro. She shares her experience as Manager:**

## What tips would you give employers with potential applicants seeking supported employment?

It is important to have clear communication with the employee and coach. It is also very important to be open and flexible as the employee learns the proper techniques for the position they are in.

## Why are natural supports in the workplace important?

It allows both employees to touch base on what is going on when they see each other but also create a work relationship. I think this also can bring the employee back to level zero, almost like restarting the day.

## What can you expand on the importance of good communication between your employee, the employment provider and job coach?

Communication is key for the success of the employee. The communication that we have between all three of us allows everyone to be on the same page and has guided me to lay out a plan that will work for Conrad and the organization.

## How does having a job coach benefit your employee and your organization?

Having a job coach has increased employee engagement with our guests. Our coach has identified the strengths Conrad has and setting skills in place, so he can apply them in situations when doing guest encounters. For our organization, knowing that someone is there to help achieve the goal with a guest is very important. Abilities First has served us as a great community partner and has offered great resources and assistance to meet our current and future goals at Wonders of Wildlife.

## Resources:



**Home - Abilities First – Abilities First Employment Services- Art Inspired Academy**

**<http://www.asportingchance.net/index.html>**

**<https://education.missouri.edu/outreach/pre-employment-transition-services/>**

**<https://www.missouristate.edu/bearpower/>**

**<https://www.burrellcenter.com/our-services/autism-services/>**

**<https://dmh.mo.gov/dev-disabilities>**

**<https://dsqo.life/>**

**<http://www.judevine.org/springfield-hub/>**

**<https://dss.mo.gov/fsd/rsb/vr.htm>**

**<https://www.easterseals.com/midwest/>**

**Housing | Springfield | Housing Authority of Springfield (hasproperties.net)**

**<http://www.thearcoftheozarks.org/counterpoint-autism>**

**Community Living Services - Help at Home**

**<https://www.cutransit.net/>**

**<http://www.cpozarks.org/>**

**<https://www.novacenteroftheozarks.org/>**

**<https://www.otc.edu/>**

**<https://www.dcoonline.com/>**

**Employment Services | Preferred Family Healthcare (pfh.org)**

**<https://www.mysagestudio.com/yoga-class-schedule?lightbox=dataltm-i3atof10>**

**Springfield-Greene County Park Board | Official Website**

**Career Center | MERS Missouri Goodwill Industries (mersgoodwill.org)**

**Workforce Board - About Us | Springfield, MO - Official Website**

**Developmental Disabilities – Missouri Mental Health Foundation (missourimhf.org)**

**Independent Living Questions  
Tough Questions from a Parent's Perspective...  
Food for Thought....**

*If there is a parent who would like to share their thoughts and experiences with these questions, we would love to highlight you in a future spotlight!*

- ***I know there is dignity in making mistakes. But when does the consequences of that mistake become too great and risk their independence if I support them in making decisions, I know are wrong?***
  
- ***How do we teach self-advocacy and disclosure of a diagnosis when we are teaching them to be independent? What is the balance?***
  
- ***I worry about friends, we have worked so hard on social skills and learning how to make and keep friends. But I hear that 'friends' tend to move in and take advantage of young adults with disabilities. Like eating their food, borrowing money and sleeping on their couch rent free. What can I do to help my adult child understand they are being taken advantage of?***
  
- ***I still want to clean-up after them, but I know I shouldn't. Their apartment is a wreck. What should I do?***
  
- ***How can I prepare them for living independently? How much of their finances should they be in charge of to live independently?***
  
- ***When will I know they are ready to live independently? What are the steps to getting there?***
  
- ***If I have to supplement their rent does that mean they are ready to live independently?***

