

A Body in Motion... Rae-Anna's Story

Immobile in a hospital bed, Rae-Anna began to emerge from shock. She stared at the ceiling and considered how the car accident altered her future. Everything hurt. Back injuries, a fractured knee and a crushed ankle caused chronic pain. *"I had pins and all sorts of apparatus through my leg and feet,"* she recalls. She hadn't moved in days, and did not look forward to the pain she knew would come with rehabilitation.

Adjustment

Rae-Anna's mother cared for her three children as she struggled to regain some of the mobility she lost. Returning to her job as a Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA) was out of the question at the time, and she describes that period as surreal. *"It's like going through withdrawal. I worked from the time I was 16 and I was 31 at the time of the accident,"* she says. *"That kind of messes with you. All of a sudden, there's nothing to do...nowhere to go. It felt [awful] not being able to work. You feel useless... I couldn't do anything."*

This helpless feeling was particularly hard on Rae-Anna, who is used to caring for others. She was uncomfortable being on the receiving end of patient care, but gained perspective as a consumer that she didn't have before the accident. Her injuries had a permanent impact on her mobility, and she began receiving Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI)

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benefits by the end of 2001. But they would not stop Rae-Anna from moving forward.

For years, Rae-Anna struggled to adjust to her disability while doing her best to meet the needs of her children. She was devoted to caring for them, and the activity that it required helped her recover some mobility over several years. It became clear that her SSDI benefit was not enough to support the family. *"We had no money. I couldn't buy oil to heat the house and I knew we couldn't go on living that way..."*, she says. *"I didn't know what I was going to end up doing, but I had a family to take care of so I looked for work. After a while, my body was able to adjust [to moving around] and I realized I might be able to return to some type of nursing care. There's pain but I work through it. You do what you've got to do to survive."*

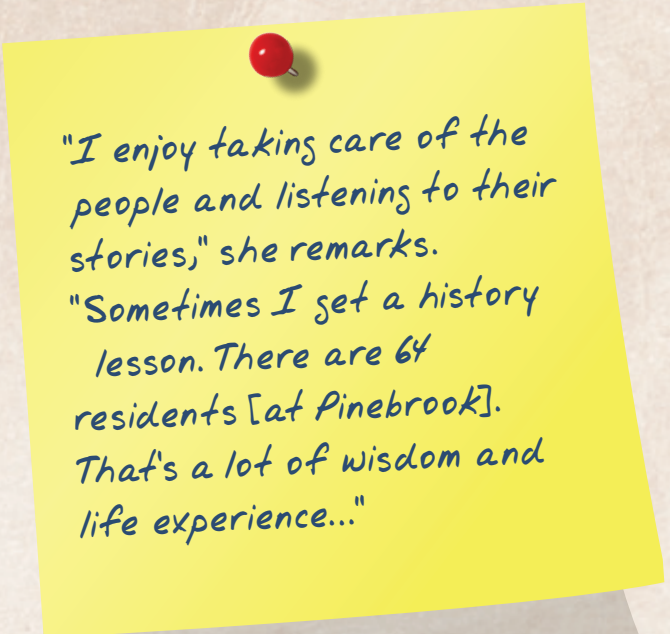
Transition

Rae-Anna's local Social Security office told her she was eligible for the Ticket to Work program. Ticket to Work supports career development for people with disabilities who want to work. Adults age 18 through 64 who receive Social Security disability benefits qualify. The program is free and exists specifically to help people progress toward financial self-sufficiency. It is a good fit for people who would like to improve their earning potential and who are committed to preparing for long-term success in the workforce. Rae Anna found help at the Keystone area's Goodwill and Workforce Development Center in Pottsville (a city in Eastern Pennsylvania). Goodwill is one of many authorized providers, known as "Employment Networks" (ENs), which help people prepare for work, find a job, or advance in their career. She was grateful to find attentive professionals who answered her questions, introduced her to resources, and helped her develop an Individual Work Plan (IWP). An IWP is like a roadmap that would lead Rae-Anna to her employment goals.

"Rae-Anna had been out of the workforce for so long, learning how to work around her disability and caring for her children," says Annette Kaiser, Employment Services Manager at Goodwill Keystone. "She was very nervous about going back to work. We helped create a path for her to get to the job she wanted."

"You don't realize how much confidence you can lose not working," Rae-Anna adds. "I had no clue what to do in an interview, or whether I would be able to work in a capacity related to nursing again," she says.

As a workforce development center, Goodwill offers a broad range of support services to people with disabilities who want to work. Workforce development centers like Goodwill are also known as "American Job Centers." American Job Center services vary from one office to another, and may include benefits counseling, skills assessment, referral to vocational training, résumé writing, workshops to enhance job search skills, and related supports.




"I enjoy taking care of the people and listening to their stories," she remarks. "Sometimes I get a history lesson. There are 64 residents [at Pinebrook]. That's a lot of wisdom and life experience..."

Rae-Anna met with a benefits counselor at Goodwill to learn how working would affect her benefits. She learned that rules called Work Incentives make it easier for adults with disabilities to enhance job skills and gain work experience. While working, recipients of Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) can keep their Medicare coverage. Rae-Anna would be able to test her ability to work during a nine-month "Trial Work Period" (TWP), while receiving cash benefits. One month after the TWP ends, a 36-month "Extended Period of Eligibility" (EPE) begins. During the EPE, Rae-Anna's cash benefits would be suspended only in months when her income exceeds \$1,040. She was also relieved to learn that a Social Security Work Incentive called "Expedited Reinstatement" (EXR) may enable her to re-start her benefits again without a new application, if she had to stop work because of her disability within five years.

A New Day

When Rae-Anna was comfortable that she was making an informed decision about work, Goodwill did some career counseling with her. *"She was pretty certain she wanted to go back to work in a nursing capacity so we explored with her how to work around her physical limitations," says Kaiser. "We helped her put together a résumé, practice interview skills and explore opportunities."*



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Rae-Anna and the staff at Goodwill screened job leads. As she went on interviews, she refined her skills and accepted an offer. By 2010, she was working at two jobs. Still in the EPE, Rae Anna is supported knowing she will receive a cash benefit in any month when her income falls below \$1,040. She begins the day as a home health aide, assisting seniors with the activities of daily living. In the afternoon and evenings, she wears many hats at Pinebrook, a residential care facility for seniors. Rae-Anna enjoys her role as a "Med Tech" and Personal Care Assistant. She helps with meals, medication, and personal care, offering companionship in the process.

In addition to improving her financial stability, Rae-Anna's jobs bring back the variety and social interaction she had missed for so many years. It had been a long time since Rae-Anna answered the question "how was your day?" with satisfaction.

"I enjoy taking care of the people and listening to their stories," she remarks. "Sometimes I get a history lesson. There are 64 residents [at Pinebrook]. That's a lot of wisdom and life experience," she says. Rae-Anna also notes how

nice it is to work with people that look forward to seeing her. *"It's nice to be appreciated," she says. "We have things in common and there is a mutual respect I've established with [many residents]. I'm glad I've found work. It has helped us pay our bills, gets me out of the house, and allows me to set a good example for my children."*

Annette Kaiser adds:

"Rae-Anna is now in a position where she knows what she wants, is thriving at work, and is more confident in her skills and market value."

A Future with Choices

Being back at work has been both exhausting and liberating for Rae-Anna. Employment has given her choices she didn't have before her return to work. She has a sense of empowerment that has given her hope and lifted her spirits.

"[Work] totally changed everything. I went from not working to having two jobs, being able to pay bills, and take care of the house in ways I wasn't able to do before. I can buy new clothes for my kids. I no longer have to shop for everything at the thrift store. It's nice to know I have choices. When I was on disability I could not look beyond the next day. Now I can make some plans. I'd like to get a medical assistant's degree. Before I didn't think I could get into school or pay for it. For the first time since 1986, I think maybe I can!"

