

Editorial

The continued movement away from segregated employment toward inclusive employment and education has never been more evident than on October 20, 2005 when Michael Nelson and Kate Bartlett testified before the US Congress.

In the Editorial of the 24.1 issue of the JVR, the testimony of Robert Lawhead, given October 20, 2005 before the US Senate Committee on Health, Education, Pensions and Labor, was presented. In this issue we present the testimonies of Kate Bartlett and Michael Nelson also from the Committee hearing “Opportunities for Too Few? Oversight of Federal Employment Programs for Persons with Disabilities.”

Mr. Michael Nelson, a former sheltered workshop employee, spoke powerfully about the isolation, segregation, lack of opportunity, and minuscule income he experienced as a sheltered workshop employee (“about \$44 for most months’ work”). In his testimony and in the question and answer period that followed, he spoke with pride of his current job at a video store in the community and about the importance of working at a real job in the community.

Ms. Kate Bartlett, is currently pursuing an associate degree from Middlesex Community College in Bedford, Massachusetts. A recipient of the National Down Syndrome Society’s (NDSS) Joshua O’Neill and Zeshan Tabani Enrichment Fund for postsecondary education, Ms. Bartlett spoke eloquently on behalf of NDSS about her inclusive education, employment experiences and hopes for the future.

Both Kate Bartlett and Michael Nelson played an important role in raising the expectations and underscoring the abilities of individuals with disabilities, adding to the Committee’s understanding of the importance of both inclusive education and employment opportunities.

1. Mr. Michael Nelson Greeley, CO: Former sheltered workshop employee, Current Hollywood Video employee

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee:
Hello and thank you for the invitation to share my story

with the committee. My name is Mike Nelson and I live in Greeley, Colorado, and attended a segregated school just for students with disabilities as I lived with my family. I moved out of our home in the late 80’s when I was 27 years old. I am a very independent kind of a person and very proud of it. I’m too independent to be told what to do and can handle most situations on my own. People underestimate me all the time because I use this scooter to get around. Currently I am very happy to be employed at Hollywood Video for 10.5 hours a week and earn \$5.85 an hour. My first sheltered workshop job started around 1976 when I was bussed from a segregated school in the mornings to the workshop every afternoon. The school bus would pick me up at the workshop at the end of the day and take me back home too. I have worked about 15 years in one workshop or another. The kinds of work we did the at the workshops included putting fish hooks in bags for Eagle Claw company, cleaning headphones for United Airlines, running heavy machinery to staple bags together, and putting together recycled computer fans for IBM. None of these jobs were really training for work in the community, but just wasted time. I thought I was supposed to get training to move from the workshop into a real job. It was called ‘pre-vocational’ training, but the ‘pre’ part often means never. Why would you want to retire from a sheltered workshop at 65 after preparing for a community job all your life? All of the pay for these jobs was piece rate, not by the hour, but at the beginning I thought I was being paid by the hour. Piece rate is allowed so that people with disabilities don’t get paid minimum wage, but by the piece of work they perform. If IBM had to return a job to be corrected, there would not be any pay to redo the job. None of my paychecks were the same amount because we were paid piece rate. My check was about \$44 for most months’ work. It was not worth the transportation costs, staff time, or my time. I was not being trained for anything. After I moved to Greeley, case managers from the D.D. system promised that I could get a community job as I had requested for four years at each planning meeting. The job never came about, so they said that the sheltered workshop was always there and

it was all they could find for me. We had an individual planning meeting each year that was always the same – They always said: “If you want to work; it has to be the workshop.” I continued to request a real job, but nothing ever happened until I met some new friends in leadership training on public policy. The people there introduced me to a person at the University of Northern Colorado and I then worked on a grant there and earned \$7.00 an hour. Case managers kept saying that I would fail at the job, that I would have to be at the workshop, and it would not last. Well, the grant did run out, but luckily I have found a job at Hollywood Video and hope to never hear another staff person question my skills or recommend that I work at the workshop the rest of my life.

I now work at Hollywood Video and enjoy meeting other workers and customers who live in the neighborhood. The pay, as well as the job, is much better than any of the many workshops I spent time in. I get minimum wage and work for ten hours a week and couldn't be happier with the job. If I have questions on the job, I get it from other people who work there. My supervisor treats me like I would expect to be treated at work – with respect and high expectations. I appreciate the time from your committee and hope that you are able to make some huge changes in the way the system works. People with disabilities need to be able to have real jobs with a decent wage and benefits. I would like to earn enough money to not depend on social security and Medicaid. I would like to distribute a copy of my story for all of you and hope you enjoy it. Thanks again.

2. Ms. Kate Bartlett: Student at Middlesex Community College, Arlington, MA

Hello, my name is Kate Bartlett. I am testifying today on behalf of the National Down Syndrome Society, which advocates to improve the lives of 350,000 children and adults with Down syndrome and their families. I am a student at Middlesex Community College in Bedford, Massachusetts, and am working on my Associate Degree. I want what everyone wants. I want to be happy, have friends and be able to live independently

in the world. I grew up in Arlington, Massachusetts and attended regular education classes in our neighborhood schools. Growing up, I was a girl scout, played on soccer, basketball and softball teams; sang in a chorus and took dance classes. In high school, the work got harder but I took college prep classes and because of that was able to pass the MCAS and graduate with my class in 2004. In high school, I was on the swim team and got 4 varsity letters in swimming. I was also a co-captain in my senior year. I performed and traveled with the high school chorus. We went on great trips to Quebec, the Hudson River Valley, and Charleston, South Carolina. I loved singing in the chorus and hope to join another one. I also work out at our local gym and have since I was a freshman in high school. Last year I attended Lesley College's Threshold Program for students with learning disabilities. I lived in a dorm in Cambridge, attended class three days a week and was an intern in a Harvard Square optical store two days a week. Although I did well in classes and at work (the owner wanted to hire me last summer but I already had a job), there were roommate issues and I left after one semester. In January I enrolled at Middlesex Community College and that is working great. Right now I am taking a six credit English class and a voice class. I work during summers and school vacations. My jobs included an office support position in the benefits department of a Boston staffing company and a support associate at Macy's. In the office position I put together benefits packages and I was responsible for labeling, copying, filing and shredding. I enjoyed the office position and made some nice friends. I was fortunate to receive two scholarships from Arlington High and the National Down Syndrome Society's Joshua O'Neill and Zeshan Tabani Scholarship Fund. College is expensive, it's nice to have help. I am happy. As you can see my life is pretty normal. I have a loving family, caring friends and a life I enjoy. I am not sure what I want to do for a career in the future. I hope to figure that out in college. I know I want to have a career that I enjoy. I want to love going to work everyday and be great at whatever I choose to do. I want to continue making friends, participating in social and cultural activities, and live on my own again some day.