



RENEE JEWELL

Submitted by Renee Wright, VR Counselor

As a former recipient of VR services, and now in my role as a VR counselor, I have had the marvelous opportunity to witness first-hand the tremendous positive impact VR has made in my own life, and in the lives of the consumers VR staff serves each day. Kathy Ashley, who passed away in 2014, was my first VR counselor. She embodied all the qualities of what I consider to be an excellent VR counselor. She was warm, genuine, caring, creative, and a big believer in people's potential. Her shining example is one I try to live up to each day in my own practice as a VR counselor. When Kathy and I met, I was a hostess at MCL Cafeteria, making minimum wage. Kathy observed I could not see well, and on one of her lunchtime visits asked me if I would be interested in owning my own business in a program especially designed for individuals who were legally blind. Well, of course I was! I applied for VR services, received training on how to operate a vending business, and was a vendor in the Blind Enterprise Program (BEP) program for 17 years. Owning my own business provided me with financial stability and confidence in myself. However, business ownership had its own share of challenges, and I had a dream to one day help people who lost their vision live up to their own potential.

So back to VR I went in 2009. I explained to my VR counselor at the time that although I had been blessed for many years with a successful business, times had changed, and it was difficult physically to keep up with the demands of the day-to-day operations. In addition, I had reached a point in the program where there was really no further opportunity for upward mobility. My VR counselor at the time patiently listened, and asked me what my future goals were for employment. I shared with her that I wanted to work as a counselor with people who were blind and visually impaired. She believed in me, and we developed a plan for me to get the necessary education to work in social services. Little did I know at the time that I would one day be a VR counselor! In the spring of 2014 I was set to graduate from the MSW program at IUPUI, and was working with an Employment Consultant at Bosma to explore my job options. On April 10, I got the news I had Stage 3 breast cancer, treatment would start immediately, be aggressive, and there were no guarantees about the outcome. I had a heart to heart with my VR counselor Renea Semones, and we discussed if it might make sense to put my job search on-hold. I ended up deciding to plow ahead by walking across the stage to get my MSW that May, and then continue looking for a job. I had worked too hard and come too far to just stop. I decided that

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cancer just would have to come along for the ride in the pursuit of my goals and plans. Melanie Wells, the Manager of Bosma's employment services at the time asked me if I would be interested in applying for a position as a VR counselor. She said I met the qualifications, and that the job was a good fit for my skills and interests. I did indeed apply, and was invited for an interview. Steve Upchurch, who was an Area Supervisor at the time, interviewed me, and told me that the position was for a specialist who worked with blind and visually impaired consumers. Needless to say I was excited! Steve did not bat an eye when I told him I was going through cancer treatment. He told me about the job, and asked me about my skills and abilities, choosing to focus on what I could bring to the organization, and not my limitations. I then interviewed with a panel of VR employees in Steve's office, and felt like I was right at home. I jumped for joy when I was offered the position! VR made accommodations so I could get my cancer treatments, and the assistive technologies I required to do my job.

I have now been a VR counselor for almost 3 years, and thoroughly enjoy the work I do on behalf of people with disabilities. I am also happy to report I am cancer free! Yes, being a VR counselor is demanding and challenging, but is also extremely re-warding! I have the privilege of helping empower consumers to overcome their own challenges so they can live independently and work in fulfilling jobs in their communities. I experience a great sense of gratification and pride each day by getting to be a small part of the tremendous life-changing outcomes that I see with the consumers VR serves.