

Work Force Ready

By: Raquel Castaneda

Joel Castaneda is a 16 year old young man and has Down Syndrome and is also my youngest brother. He is nonverbal but tries his best to communicate which can sometimes be understood by strangers but for the most is not understandable. His speech is one of the main reasons, that as a family, we worried about his success in any job as well as people taking advantage of him. He has always been very dedicated and hard working but only when he wants to and on his terms. When he doesn't want to do something it takes a lot of effort to convince him to do it. He can spend hours doing tasks at home like coloring or organizing his closet but there was still a desire inside him to go to work.

For three years I had worked at our local Baskin Robbins and I maintained a good relationship with the owner, Ramzy Mousa. He also knew Joel very well and always made him feel comfortable whenever he visited. A couple of times when Joel would visit the store he would refuse to leave, leaving no choice but to force him out or wait until he wanted to leave. But something changed the last time he did it. I saw potential instead of disobedience.



Earlier this month, Joel walked into Baskin Robbins and went straight to the back and said the word “work”. We tried to get him to leave but he refused. Instead of forcing him out, I realized this would be a great opportunity for him. I called the owner and asked if it was okay if he stayed with me a while so he can feel accomplished. Thankfully, Ramzy was so encouraging and kind enough to let him stay as long as he wanted and said he's always welcome to come whenever he feels comfortable about it and stay as long as he wants to.



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I took this opportunity to teach him how to stock the supplies, wash the dishes, bag the orders, and make waffle cones. He enjoyed it so much and was very attentive when people walked in. He doesn't get paid by the hour like the rest of the employees but he does get tips. Which he gladly accepts.

I am grateful that Families Helping Families has given me the motivation to see opportunities for Joel in any scenario. I could've forced him out of the store instead like we had done in the past, but after hearing testimonies at events like Transition Mission that FHF has provided, I saw this moment as a chance to provide real life job training for him. There was nothing to hold me back. I knew the owner, the employees, the work, and I had the support from FHF to make his happen for him.

I am also grateful that we know such an open minded person such as Ramzy that allows Joel, who can't speak and only works when he feels like it, to come in whenever he wants for as long as he wants. What kind of employer does that? It's truly amazing and encouraging to know there are people like this out there. You'll never know until to open up and ask. Without the educational training that I have received through FHF, I don't think I would have seen this as a job opportunity for Joel. I would have just seen this as an act of rebellion. Thank you FHF for giving me an open mind and the ability to see that the opportunity to teach and train can be anywhere.



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