

HUMAN POTENTIAL AT WORK

Host - Debra Ruh



Episode #: 17 **Title: The Benefits of Vocational Rehabilitation**

Guest: Rick Sizemore **Guest Title:** Director

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Debra: Hello, this is Debra Ruh, and you're listening to Human Potential at Work. I'd like to welcome Rick Sizemore to the program today.

Rick: Well, first of all, thank you, Debra, for inviting me to be on Human Potential at Work's podcast. I'm such a fan of your podcast and have followed it since its very beginning, but I'm the director of the Wilson Workforce and Rehabilitation Center in Fishersville, Virginia, which is a division of the Virginia Department for Aging and Rehabilitative Services. And the podcast that I produce, the V R Workforce Studio, is in partnership with our 501(c)(3) non-profit foundation, the W W R C Foundation. So we're just delighted about the success of Human Potential at Work, and very thrilled to be here and to be able to talk with you, and know that my good friend, Doug Foresta, is back behind the curtain, taking care of all the technical aspects of podcasting.

Debra: I know. Thank goodness for Doug. So Rick, I know that you were one of the first listeners of the podcast. You mentioned you had a little story.

Rick: I've got a funny little story. I listen to many, many podcasts. I love podcasting, and the opportunity for people to share stories. And so when I heard about Human Potential at Work, it was actually from Doug Foresta. We do a little piece on the V R Workforce Studio called The Foresta 5, and that's the top picks in workforce podcasts. In the episode, Doug went through some of his favorites, and one he talked about was Human Potential at Work.

I was excited to actually listen to the first episode, driving through of all places, Washington D.C., on that beltway. And if you spend much time in Northern Virginia, you know that's not always a stress-free kind of experience. And so, I'm going along, I see the little red light on, I've subscribed, I go, cool, this is my first hearing of this podcast. And there was something very tranquil. There was something very tranquil about the story of your daughter and your message, that almost made the traffic and the stress of being on that beltway diminish.

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And I can tell you, for most podcasts that I listen to, within the first couple of minutes I can tell you if I'm going to hit the subscribe button or if it's not going to really make it into my queue. And this was one that I was instantly hooked with, because of the message that you bring to the world, of empowerment, of helping people with disabilities and those who've been dependent, move to independence. That's an exciting message for me. It's exciting. The work that you do is exciting, but to hear it come across the internet and the podcast was just a thrilling day for me.

Debra: That's a beautiful story. I remember doing that episode with Sara, and I wasn't sure how it was going to come out because we are mother and daughter. So it's like, sometimes she wants to do what I want to do, and sometimes she doesn't. so thank you, Rick. That's a very beautiful story, and I really appreciate the kind words.

Rick, for our listeners that don't really know what W W R C is, will you talk a little bit about what you are doing out there? And also, a lot of people probably don't know where Fishersville, Virginia is, either. It's one of the most beautiful parts of Virginia, so maybe you could talk a little bit about that and Fishersville, Virginia as well.

Rick: Sure. Fishersville is just outside of Staunton, home of the Statler Brothers, if you're a country music fan, at the intersection of Interstate 64 and 81 in central Virginia, not far from Charlottesville and Harrisonburg. So it is nestled in the scenic and beautiful Shenandoah Valley. The center, the Wilson Workforce and Rehabilitation Center has been around since 1947. And we just changed our name last year, to the Wilson Workforce and Rehabilitation Center. For years, we were known as the Woodrow Wilson Rehabilitation Center, and we're one of only eight comprehensive medical and vocational rehabilitations centers in the country.

So on any given day, about 350 students are here on campus, in one form of vocational or physical rehabilitation, that helps them move from being dependent to independent and helps them move from being unemployed to that ultimate goal of employment. Our podcast, V R Workforce Studio, really is a result of the success stories of vocational rehabilitation. We talk with people whose lives have been sometimes forever changed by disability, or from birth a person's had a disability, and we chronical the journeys of people and talk about their struggles. We give people a platform to be able to describe the transformation that occurs through vocational rehabilitation, and follow them onto that ultimate goal of employment.

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So it's, again, a place that's been around quite a while, and many people have visited and utilized the center through the years, to help themselves get a job following disability.

Debra: And I know that Virginia considers it a real successful venture, and that you've worked with many corporations over the years, helping them create programs that include people with disabilities in the workforce, being very creative with the programs. And you also have some very, very talented people working at the center.

I remember one time I went to the center and I took a tour and I was -- well, I'd been there multiple times, but I was just amazed at how big it was and what is actually happening there. I remember on the tour there was a -- I don't remember the gentleman's name -- but there was a rehab engineer that was telling us a story about a woman that had been born with an intact spinal cord column, but she was not born with legs. And so he took a mannequin model, and to be honest, Rick, you might tell this story better than I do, but what he did for this woman, it was just such a beautiful, empowering story. And I thought, there is so much more going on here than what meets the eye. You're preparing people with disabilities to enter the workforce. It's a college for people with disabilities and people that have acquired disabilities, to get back to work.

I know my daughter went there and did a 10-day program and learned a lot of things. Does she have all the different things needed to drive, for example. We as a family, we knew that she could, for example, learn how to drive, she could probably learn how to operate the machinery, but we were unsure about her responsiveness in a situation, which happens all the time to us driving. The W W R C actually came back to us and helped us understand that probably wasn't a great idea for anyone, including Sara, to be behind the wheel, except for maybe on our property on a golf cart. So it helped us empower our daughter more.

But do you know the story that I'm referring to, with the mannequin model?

Rick: I do, and that's one that sort of lives on in infamy here, and the assistance it has provided. There are many, many of the consumers who come to W W R C with a serious physical injury, and many of our stories feature what is our, I think, success stories of people who have had near-death experiences and recovered from those injuries and debilitating conditions, to go to work.

There's a larger portion of our consumers that are here for transition or vocational training. They've been in high school and this is that step. And I love the way you framed that. In fact, our commissioner, Jim Rothrock, often refers to us as the college for people with disabilities.

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And so, we have people in all phases of their life, sort of moving through, learning new skills, learning to live on campus, learning to be part of a community, leading to that ultimate goal of the vocational training that prepares them to go to work.

You had mentioned the number of corporations that we work with. We're in a partnership now with CVS Health, and they've set up a mock store for our students to go in and train. It's just like the CVS Pharmacy or CVS Health Store in your local community that you might visit. And once they've trained here, they can go out and do an internship at one of four local CVS stores, where they can really have that on-the-job vocational experience that leads to employment. I just can't say enough good things about the companies, and there are many of them, like CVS, who embrace disability employment, who have inclusive hiring practices, that give individuals with disabilities these opportunities to really experience that on-the-job, real-life training, that ultimately does lead to employment.

Debra: Right. And of course, that's what it's about. Everybody wants to work. I just want to take a second and tell that story about the model, just because maybe our listeners haven't heard it. But it was such a beautiful story, because the woman could not sit in a wheelchair because she didn't have, really hips or legs to support herself sitting in a wheelchair, so she couldn't really go out in public because she had no way of really doing that unless someone carried her.

And so, one of the rehab engineers took an old model, a mannequin, cut it in half, shaped it to this woman's body, and actually allowed this woman, for the first time, to sit in a wheelchair and go out in public, go to the mall and just be like everybody else.

It just brought chills to me, because I thought, that's all we want. We just all want to be part of society. I realized that I didn't understand the magic that was happening at W W R C. I want to keep calling it the old name, Rick.

But tell us a couple of other stories like that, because I know that there's magic happening there, but I want to share some of those stories with our listeners.

Rick: Well, we appreciate that opportunity so much. A gentleman who worked at the Bank of America in Richmond, a man named Brian Evans, was recently here. On the first of July -- I'm going to start with the end of the story. On the first of July of this year, he went back to work at the Bank of America there in Richmond, in an executive position.

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You have to roll the clock back about a year. He had a tremendous motorcycle accident. He was actually trying to help a friend and wound up taking a different route, and woke up on the interstate, underneath a guardrail, not knowing what happened, if a deer ran out in front of him or if there was a mechanical failure. Literally, he was at M C V and in his words, really died a couple of times and came back to life, and found himself in that state of being depressed and not having direction and not knowing what life would hold for him, and he connected with WWRC. He calls that really this transformational experience.

I had the opportunity to interview him, and a little shameless plug, in fact he'll be on the podcast that comes out last month, and he talks about the human being an incredible species, that we can overcome, we can build airplanes and go to the moon, but he defines his success by this new status he's in of being in a wheelchair and having all the challenges of living in a wheelchair, and going back to work at the bank, with some assistive technology, Dragon Dictate with a modified van, and the transformation that existed for him in that near-death experience was one of recognizing the potential of his life in this new state, and seeing that he's able to overcome this and becoming incredibly motivated to actually get back to that job at the bank.

And so he's back, he's working successfully, his family is intact and he has a whole new, almost spiritual outlook, on the value of life, defining this success of going back to work as one of this greatest accomplishments, whereas before he said if you'd asked him prior to his accident, his measure of success would have been financial. So he's an incredible guy.

Individuals with disabilities that I have had the great honor to interview, have really offered some themes. One of those themes is people with disabilities, especially those focused on going back to work, just want to be treated the same as everyone else. I mean, let's face it. 87 percent, according to the voc rehab journals, 87 percent of people prefer to do business with an enterprise that employs people with disabilities.

And so, the other theme that comes up quite often, is a message to employers around empowerment, and that is people will be motivated and inspired because they see what we are doing in your business. And that's an exciting thing.

I'll share one other story with you. That's of Jennifer Britts. She was a champion ATV racer. In fact, for many years she was the woman to beat in the Mid-Atlantic region. She had, again, a near-death accident, wound up in a wheelchair as a result of a crash during a race. She went through an extensive rehabilitation program and went back to work. Shortly after her return to work, there was an

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ice storm. So she got up an hour early, got in her wheelchair, made it across Charlottesville, showed up at the office, only to have the boss and all the other workers come in an hour or so late. The boss said, well hold on a minute, I don't want to hear anybody complain, when the girl in the wheelchair beats everyone to the office by an hour, none of us have anything to complain about.

So there's this great inspiration that happens when people see the motivation and the dedication and the creativity, the fortitude, that individuals with disabilities bring to the work environment.

Debra: That is such a powerful story, and it really talks about the spirits. Our spirit and our spirit to overcome. Often on the podcast, we talk about people with disabilities aren't broken. To be honest, maybe we do get broken a little bit along the way, and then we pick ourselves up and we decide who we're going to be. And I think it's so powerful to have organizations like WWRC out there, to help people as all of a sudden they realize, in the two examples you gave, that their life has taken a very unexpected turn, but that doesn't mean that they still don't want to work, they don't want to contribute to society, they don't want to take care of themselves and take care of their families and add value to society. I think that's one reason why W W R C is just so powerful. I really am blessed that I have the honor to be able to have you on, talking about it.

But Rick, tell our listeners how they can tune into your podcast. Tell us, again, the name of it and where they can subscribe to the podcast, and also how they can find out more about W W R C.

Rick: Okay, great. Our podcast is at V R, for vocational rehabilitation, VRWorkforceStudio.com. If you go to the website, we have a different episode up about every month. There will be a big green button. Just click the "listen now" tab, and that will take you right to the player. One thing we've made the commitment to, given that we serve individuals with disabilities, is to fully transcribe our podcast. So if you want to read it, that will be right under the player.

You can also subscribe, if you have Apple products, you can subscribe in iTunes, so that's available, or you can hear us on Stitcher Radio. The podcast co-host, Ann Hudlow, is the director of our foundation, and this is really a partnership. We're telling stories about vocational rehabilitation successes in our foundation. It takes the stories and then puts them out at VRWorkforceStudio.com and distributes them.

Because what we've learned is that people hear these stories and they're moved, on a deep and profound level. The stories of hearing people overcome these

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obstacles, they're transformative, and people relate to that and want to help. So our foundation is there in case they'd like to get more involved. You can find the foundation at WWRCF.org, or you can learn about W W R C and our programs at WWRC.Virginia.gov. And we offer tours. We'd be delighted for anyone who's interested in our center, to stop by and take a tour. See what we're all about.

Debra: Yeah, the tours are amazing. I highly recommend them. Rick, what if I'm a corporation and I want to start employing people with disabilities and learning more about retaining the individuals with disabilities that already work for me? Who should I contact at WWRC, and would that be limited to only Virginia-based companies, or could any corporations come to WWRC and learn more about your programs and the amazing people that you're supporting?

Rick: Well, let me make the first comment about if you are an organization and you would like to start hiring people with disabilities. Let me put it this way. Boy, do we have a deal for you, because we'd be so excited to talk with any business or industry, big or small, that is interested in hiring individuals with disabilities. We are primarily a Virginia organization, part of the Virginia Department for Aging and Rehabilitative Services. However, we are connected throughout the country and the V R program and can always reach out to our sister agencies in other states. The center is part of a national consortium of eight centers, and we always can reach out to those centers.

But here's the magic of our organization, and that is we're very focused with business development manager, and they profile the state and they constantly analyze labor market information, to determine where the jobs are, and then cross-reference that with the kinds of jobs that the consumers we are serving are suited for and interested in. So it's a cross-section between what are the jobs and what are the jobs that our consumers can perform.

Literally, we work with Lowes, Home Depot, we work with CVS Pharmacy, we work with CVS Health, we work with the Hershey Company, and a whole host of others. So it's a statewide outreach of our business development managers. So if there is an entity, and organization, an industry who would like more information about that, just contact me here at W W R C, Rick.Sizemore@WWRC.Virginia.gov, and I can connect you with our contingent of business development managers that cover the whole state.

And something that is very important is our agency is not only focused on the individual that we're serving; we're focused on that business and can offer worksite assessments and modifications and assistance and consultation on the ADA, and provide assistance to a business that is thinking of extending this opportunity. And I guess again, I would emphasize that message that so many of

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the guests on the VR Workforce Studio offer employers, and that is your business will benefit. Your customers will be inspired by what they see, when you employ individuals with disabilities, and you will want to hire more individuals with disabilities, once you've experienced it.

Debra: Rick, thank you so much for being on the show today. You prove, once again, the point that we're trying to make with this podcast. The only disability is not being able to see human potential. Thank you.

Rick: It was my pleasure to be here. Thank you.