

Ottawa man's job experience leads to discovery of life's work

Tuesday August 12, 2003 Sheri Fiegehen

When it comes to finding meaningful work, some people innately know what their calling is, while others fall upon it by chance.

Keenan Wellar, the co-founder and CEO of an Ottawa, Ontario organization that supports people with developmental disabilities, is an example of the latter.

"I came into this (line of work) by accident," Wellar says in a phone interview. While he was a university student, he answered an advertisement to work part-time with youth. The advertisement didn't specify that the job involved working with youth who have developmental disabilities.

"I didn't know anything about developmental disabilities, but I learned a lot, and I was inspired," Wellar says. His job experience, working once a week in recreational programming was also "shocking in some ways," says Wellar. The participants' life choices were limited, he explains – for example, the three-hour a week recreation program was, for most of the participants, the only time they got out of their homes.

"I was struck by the challenges faced by individuals with developmental disabilities and their families. I was angry, actually," he says. "It was an eye opener."

And, it was a motivator. Wellar knew that his life work would involve improving the quality of life for people with developmental disabilities.

He says he felt a sense of accomplishment and well-being, knowing he was helping people, "but I also saw a problem to be solved. It intrigued me; it got me cooking."

In 1997, he co-founded LiveWorkPlay. The organization provides daytime support for young adults with developmental disabilities, with a goal of working toward independence in all areas of life: employment, social skills, community volunteering, cooking, computer skills, taking public transportation, even organizing to go to a movie. Individualized plans are developed for each of the 70 participants to meet their goals.

Although Wellar agrees that his work is meaningful, he says it makes him uncomfortable when people gush about how wonderful he is to do this kind of work.

"I chose to do this, not because it's making me a better person," but because it enables him to help others make tangible achievements, he says. That in itself is a meaningful achievement for him, he adds.

Indeed, being a results-oriented person, Wellar is enthusiastic about the fact his work has a concrete, optimistic effect, he says.

"I'm happy that with the work I do, I see a positive impact every day. With any job for me, that would be important. I need to take ideas and put them into action. I like to come to the table with a good idea and it doesn't take five years to implement it."

That positive impact is exemplified in the success of the LiveWorkPlay participants.

"My work is all about challenges and seeing results, seeing the people we work with achieve. When they say, 'I don't need you anymore,' it's the biggest thing ever. It's awesome – I love it."



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