

## Pathways to Competitive Integrated Employment

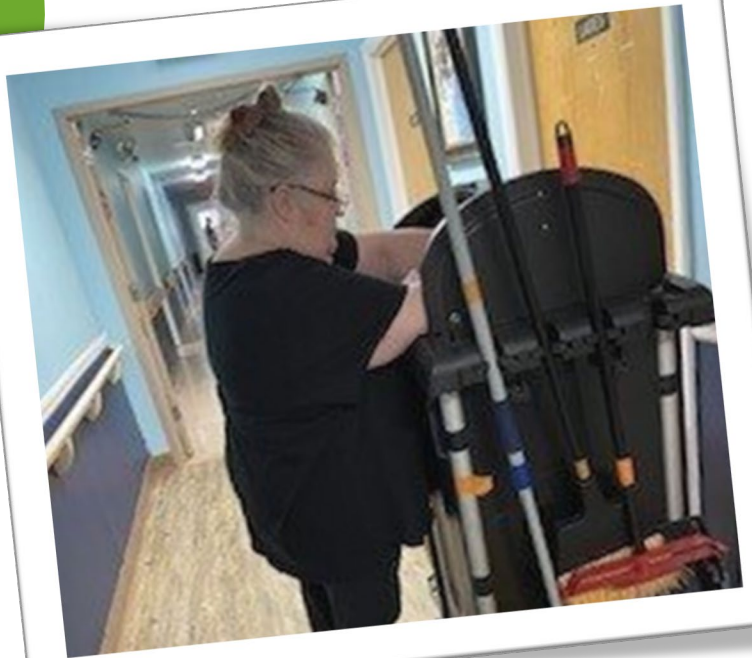
# Ruthie's Story

Meet Ruthie, a quiet-spoken, mature 56-year-old woman who knows her mind and, with a little prompting, tells you all about it!

Ruthie moved to Princeton, Indiana, to begin receiving much needed services from the Arc of Southwest Indiana after a tumultuous time of loss, including the death of both parents. Ruthie is working on long-term employment and independent living goals, and frankly says that while she is not there yet, she is on her way.

### Background

Arc Southwest has been exceptionally proactive in engaging individuals, families, staff, the board of directors, and area businesses that can assist in the transition away from a sheltered employment model. Arc Southwest officially closed their sheltered program in 2020. While the journey was not always smooth, Arc and the individuals they support now have access to services to help them achieve competitive, integrated employment. This is coupled with targeted and person-centered planning to assist individuals in building personally meaningful



days. Ruthie has transitioned alongside Arc Southwest and now enjoys the benefits of being employed in her community.

Ruthie candidly explains that while she did attend the once operational sheltered workshop at Arc Southwest, she did not like it. She describes her calloused hands from the repeated movements necessary to attach handles to buckets, a job she routinely completed at the workshop. When asked her preference for sheltered versus inclusive community employment, Ruthie doesn't hesitate to declare, "community!" She adds there were times when she would not get paid because the incoming services contract would stop, and she adds, "In community you get paid more." She also prefers the kind of work she found in the community in comparison to routine jobs at the workshop.

Ruthie currently lives in a supported group home and shrugs slightly when asked about where she lives. She enjoys having her own bedroom where she can find privacy by shutting the door. Ruthie sometimes struggles because she shares her living space with "a whole bunch of people." While this is the case, Ruthie enjoys telling of her past New Year's Eve, watching the ball drop and drinking festive, sparkling grape juice. She hopes to one day live by

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herself in her own apartment. Ruthie says that although she likes her current job, she would eventually like a job related to or involving cooking. She says she learned all she knows about cooking from her mother and grandmother.

## Finding Purpose at Work

Ruthie and her employment staff at Arc Southwest will be the first to tell you her current job is not the end job. The staff have a clear pathway, and Ruthie trusts the process. Person-centered planning and trust are key elements for realizing a goal and for long-term employment. Ruthie notes that John, one of her Arc employment professionals, helped locate a potential job opportunity at The Waters of Princeton, a rehabilitation and skilled nursing facility near Ruthie. She got help filling out a paper application, preparing for the interview, meeting the hiring person at the facility, and trying her hand at mopping a small hallway portion. Ruthie relays she likes her job at The Waters. Nikki, of Arc employment services, states it is important for Ruthie to have real-world experiences in order to build critical work-related skills in a slow-paced, supportive environment that is also competitive and integrated. As her first community job, this opportunity positively sets the stage for Ruthie's ongoing work path.

Hands down, Ruthie says the best thing about her job at The Waters is the paycheck! She proudly shares her Christmas shopping list, including people she lives with, her boss at work, and herself! Ruthie baked hand-made goodies for the people who live with her, and she bought herself a new karaoke machine. On that very machine she enjoys singing George Strait and Clint Black tunes, especially "Love Without End, Amen." She is a country girl at heart. Her favorite place to spend money is the local Walmart, where Ruthie likes buying clothes and food. Her favorite purchases are caramels with nuts and a mixed chocolate variety bag.

Ruthie's job gives her a chance to make decisions, learn self-direction, respond to and cope with

criticism, pay attention to detail, maintain a work routine, handle materials safely, and establish appropriate co-worker relationships, to name a few. Ruthie's primary job is to complete sterile cleaning of individual resident rooms, which includes mopping, dusting, emptying/changing trash, and bathroom cleansing. Ruthie smiles when sharing she uses a different mophead for bathrooms, saying of her boss, "They're picky about that."

Ruthie likes the variety of her part-time schedule, working a rotating schedule of three days one week and two days the following week. When she is not working, Ruthie either spends time at home, in community-based activities, or at the day habilitation program.

Exposure to the wide variety of vocational themes available within the larger community has helped Ruthie identify her long-term goal of employment related to cooking. This is clearly Ruthie's passion, as she will readily and specifically launch into the finer points of ingredients and recipes. When asked what her signature dish is, Ruthie speaks loudly, "bacon and beans." Not navy beans, black beans. Ruthie shares how to take meat from a turkey and cook it with vegetables (white beans, black beans, corn, cauliflower, and squash) before adding a vegetable base to create the perfect stew. Of course, you also need to add noodles and rice to that stew! Working at Waters Edge has created a vision for Ruthie, and it's one that includes her passion for cooking.

## Navigating Challenges

Ruthie admits that one of the most difficult challenges at work has been dealing with residents when they're not having a good day. She describes an incident when a resident yelled at her for "not doing a good job" and then talks about her supervisor's subsequent intervention. Even though her supervisor didn't take any punitive measures, the interaction was a valuable learning experience. Ruthie was asked to perform alternative duties to distance her from the resident. Ruthie shares these comments with a harrumph and notes that she

didn't like this and was upset the woman "lied about me." Despite the trauma of that incident, Ruthie shares that she learned that sometimes she must adjust to other people, cope with her feelings, and use people she trusts, such as her supervisor, to talk through problems.

Transportation can also be challenging for Ruthie. Because she would have to physically cross a highway-like road to walk to her place of employment, she relies on Arc staff to provide transportation to and from work. Ruthie doesn't drive. Typically, residential staff take her to work, and employment staff pick her up after work. Ruthie describes work as being far away from her home, but close to the day program. While this is currently a viable plan, Ruthie shares she would not be able to work there without that help. She frets about what might happen if these supports are not available in the future.

## Ingredients for Success

- **Honoring Personal Choice:** It's important to honor what Ruthie and her staff learned through Discovery. For example, Ruthie is working in a job that will not be her job forever, but she's gaining valuable learning experiences. The employment services team, in collaboration with the individual they support, must

continually evolve goals to meet individually identified preferences and goals.

- **Planning for Long-term Goals:** Assisting people to identify and plan for long-term goals reflects the nature of human experience. Humans are not static nor are we one-dimensional. Developing and moving towards the realization of long-term goals is empowering and supports physical and psychological well-being or quality of life.
- **Individualized Supports:** As Ruthie's story illustrates, individualized support is simply that—of the person. Each person should receive a well-defined, flexible amount of support so they can work toward and achieve their goals. This may well include vocational support, accommodations, creation of meaningful days and routines, health-care management, and a litany of others.
- **Service Coordination:** Indiana Vocational Rehabilitation, the waiver case manager, agency employment staff, family and business representatives hold key roles in positioning an individual for success. Working collaboratively is essential to coordinate transportation, representative payee responsibilities (including access to one's funds), and identification of individualized service goals.

## Words of Wisdom

For those considering transitioning to competitive employment, Ruthie gives it some thought and says, "I would tell people, to try it out and see how you like it."



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