

Pathways to Competitive Integrated Employment

Ryan's Story

Background

Meet Ryan, an agricultural enthusiast at heart. Born and raised near Fort Branch, Indiana, Ryan attended Gibson Southern High School. He's soft spoken until he begins talking about his job, then he becomes assured and animated.

Ryan says he learned to be a good worker thanks to his high school. In agriculture class, he did some welding and "cutting metal with torches." He worked in "test fields" where he also learned to "ride a combine without breaking it!" He refers to those experiences as his "rodeo days," and states emphatically, "The high school job helped me learn some of the things I know today."

Ryan lives with his grandmother, who he calls Mom. They live alone in a rural area near Princeton, Indiana. Ryan used to work at Arc's sheltered workshop but says only that he worked with buckets. Without skipping a beat, Ryan instead talks about the jobs he has now.



Arc Southwest has been proactive in engaging individuals, families, staff, the board of directors, and area businesses as they transition away from a sheltered employment business model. Through activities like focused conversation and informational exchanges, 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 and support in achieving competitive integrated employment.

As Arc Southwest transitioned, so did Ryan, who now enjoys the benefits of competitive integrated employment.

When Ryan's not working, he tends to the yard and he and his mom join forces to crack and clean pecans. Once prepped, they bag and freeze them. Local residents and neighbors buy them for \$10 per bag. Ryan and his mom split the proceeds, showcasing his entrepreneurial spirit and commitment to family.

He often says, "Yes, ma'am," firmly and clearly, when answering questions, and Ryan has a great sense of humor. "Next week is my birthday," he said. "I'll be 36. I'm getting up there." Time spent with

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family recently included Ryan and his mom baking cabbage, chickpeas, and cornbread.

Finding Purpose on the Farm

Ryan began working with John, a member of his employment services staff, to identify Ryan's interests and ideal conditions for employment. John also consulted with Ryan's mom and others who knew him well. These activities reflect best practices when gathering knowledge about any job seeker.

Ryan was hired for a part-time job at Meyer's Family Farm. As his job coach, John helped Ryan seamlessly transition into his current role at the farm.

In an unexpected turn, Ryan learned he and Zach, the farm's owner, went to high school together. In fact, Zach and Ryan attended the same agriculture course. Zach, now his supervisor at Meyer's, helped Ryan get a second part-time job at Hirsch Family Farm. Zach knows Bryan, who owns the Hirsh farm, and both are now benefitting from Ryan's skills.

Ryan's responsibilities at Meyer farm include tending turkeys and driving tractors. He'll tell you frankly, "It smells like a turkey farm. Turkeys poop, and it smells!" One of Ryan's jobs is to "walk the turkeys," meaning he walks behind a group to steer them toward a destination. Ryan says the turkeys walk straight, but "if they hear you gobble at them, they might turn direction."

Zach is also responsible for changing the sterilization pans. These dipping pans for the rubber boots worn by all who enter the turkey areas, sanitize the boots to prevent the spread of diseases. Zach explains that turkeys can carry a coughing disease. The farm uses "this guy named Joe that comes down and checks" on the health of the turkeys.

Another of his responsibilities involves driving the tractors. "I drive two tractors," he says, "because Zach lets me drive the hydrostatic ones." While taking a miniscule break, Ryan happily adds, "Next, I am going to learn to drive the skid steerer."

A Paycheck, Productivity, and Friendship

Ryan currently works part-time Tuesdays and Thursdays from roughly 8 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. Zach picks him up and takes him to work and then takes him home. In the employment services field, Zach would be referred to as an example of "natural support." Zach even helped Ryan and his mom complete Ryan's tax return. Ryan is looking forward to getting a refund this year! Ryan also shares that Zach independently purchased appropriate work attire and working boots for Ryan.

In addition, Ryan appreciates the free meals he gets when working at Meyers Family Farm. Zach's wife fixes lunch and brings the lunches to the field where Ryan and Zach are working. In the mornings, Ryan works alongside Zach. In the afternoons, he works independently.

Ryan also works one day a week at Hirsch Farms, assisting with grain hauling and tractor operation. He sees a future where he is working full-time.

When asked about his work preferences, specifically comparing sheltered work to competitive integrated employment, Zach quickly notes his preference for competitive integrated employment. That's because he makes more money, he has developed a strong bond with his employer, and he enjoys the types of tasks he is doing.

Of all the things he enjoys about his job, Ryan will tell you the best thing about his work is his friendship with Zach. What does he dislike? Ryan readily replies, "I love it! I don't like the smell, but I love my job."

Looking ahead, Ryan plans to continue thriving in his current role, cherishing his friendship with Zach and the sense of fulfillment it brings. He is also exploring the possibility of living independently.

Navigating Challenges

Ryan and his mom recognize the importance of planning for the future. Families experience varying financial assets and people-resources, such as extended family members. Planning for a future without parents is a daunting task. Ryan and his mom have put plans in place that include Ryan's ownership of their home. Ryan explains this will allow him to have a place to live, and he adds, "I love the thought of staying at my house." He says he may even have a roommate. "If I want someone to live with me, I can do that." Ryan is careful to point out that his cat, Ellie, will stay with him too!

When the time comes, Ryan may face challenges associated with managing home and budget responsibilities. Currently, he has natural supports.

Ingredients for Success

- **The Presumption of Employability:** It's important that families and support teams adopt a presumption of employability. In other words, we must believe that everyone has gifts to contribute to the workplace regardless of disability or previous struggles.
- **Natural Supports:** Ryan's success is made possible through support available within his

natural work environment. While job coaching, on-site support, and employment services were provided by Arc Southwest, Arc Southwest also recognized and encouraged support from the people surrounding Ryan within his work environment. Natural support can be exceptionally powerful.

- **Who You Know:** Networking within a community can be the most effective tool for job development and relationship building. As is often the case, it isn't "what" you know, but "who" you know. Ryan and Zach knew one another by virtue of inclusive education at Gibson Southern High School, and Zach also knew Bryan, another area farmer. That familiarity opened a pathway for Ryan.
- **A Place for Everyone:** We are all unique. We all have talents and strengths, as well as support needs. Individuals with disabilities can offer unique contributions; finding their niche is a collaborative responsibility. There is a place for everyone within competitive integrated employment. Individuals with more significant disabilities require providers to work diligently on their behalf as they creatively pursue competitive integrated employment.

Words of Wisdom

For those considering transitioning to competitive employment, Ryan offers two fundamental pieces of advice:

- Community employment pays better, and you have the chance to work alongside friends.
- Good things can happen when you make the transition to community employment.



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