



THE STORY

CELEBRATING TEACHERS & NURSES!

Jessica Wertz

“To me, having a job means that I can support myself while simultaneously benefiting my community – what more could anyone ask for?” – Jessica

Meet Jessica Wertz, a high school itinerant learning support teacher at Commonwealth Charter Academy, where she has worked for four years, teaching students with specific learning disabilities, autism, emotional disturbances, and other health impairments in grades 10 through 12.

What Jessica likes best about her job is that she’s able to connect with students and their families to help the students reach their academic goals. “I feel that my personal experience as a deaf individual helps me to relate to my students and teach them valuable life lessons about navigating the world as an individual with a disability, including disability pride and self-advocacy skills that they can utilize throughout high school, as well as after graduation when they pursue post-secondary education, employment, and/or independent living,” Jessica said.

Jessica graduated from the Indiana University of Pennsylvania in 2018 with a bachelor’s degree in disability services. In 2020, she earned her master’s degree in deaf education from the National Technical Institute for the Deaf at Rochester Institute of Technology and, in 2022, a second master’s degree in special education from IUP.

Since Jessica was a senior in high school she’s partnered with the Office of Vocational Rehabilitation’s (OVR’s) Altoona Bureau of Vocational Rehabilitation Services (BVRs) office to access a



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variety of services, including job coaching, financial assistance to obtain post-secondary education, and provision of hearing aids and hearing assistive technology, including a Roger FM system to assist her in completing college and graduate school while maintaining full-time employment. Jessica also worked at OVR's Summer Academy for Students who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing as a resident assistant (2017 & 2018) and a resident assistant director (2019).

When asked what has helped her overcome barriers and succeed, Jessica shared that "one of the biggest factors that helped me to succeed and overcome barriers was learning about the wide variety of options that are out there for deaf and hard of hearing individuals like me in the workforce."

Jessica's advice for others with disabilities considering employment is "to find and/or create a support network for yourself of people with disabilities who have been successful in finding and maintaining employment or who have similar goals as you." She also noted the importance of researching and trying available supports and services. Jessica explained that "so many doors opened for me once I began to utilize accommodations and assistive technology in school and in the workforce, many of which I did not have any experience with utilizing prior to becoming an OVR client."

Staff Shoutouts: Stacey Thompson, VR Counselor; Carol Nelson, Supervising VR Counselor; Brittany Peterman, VR Counselor (former); and Shasta Dreese, Rehabilitation Counselor for the Deaf & Hard of Hearing (former)

David McCullough

For many years, David McCullough was a full-time engineer. In 2011, he reconnected with OVR's Altoona Bureau of Blindness & Visual Services (BBVS) office for assistance, as he had started his own engineer consulting business and was having difficulty working from home with his declining vision.

In 2017, due again to declining vision, David needed to reconsider career options and reached out to BBVS. He was interested in substituting for his local school district, but technology was a challenge due to his visual impairment. After working with his Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor and Vision Rehabilitation Therapist, who assisted with counseling and guidance, a low vision evaluation and low vision devices, and assistive technology, David started substituting at his local school district, and now is a regular substitute there! He has also maintained his own engineering consulting business part time. What he likes



best about his careers is “the variety of work options and the ability to work with other people.”

For David, employment means “financial security and support, a sense of community and participation in society and success in doing something right.” His advice for others with disabilities pursuing employment is to not “be afraid to ask for help and participate in the opportunities available through BBVS.”

Staff Shoutouts: Nicole Fisher, VR Counselor; Shelley Haupt, Vision Rehabilitation Therapist; and Amanda Turner, VR Supervisor

Madison Crum

Madison Crum is passionate about special education because she has relatives with disabilities and decided to pursue a career in that field. After high school graduation, she overcame barriers with repeated health issues to obtain a bachelor’s degree in special education and found employment as an autistic and emotional support teacher and transition coordinator at a local high school. What she loves about her job is that she gets to have a positive impact on students’ futures. “Having a job means a lot to me,” she shared. “Seeing how I can make a difference in student’s lives is astounding.”



Since high school, OVR’s Johnstown BVRs office has worked with Madison to provide adaptive equipment to support her success in education and financial assistance with education, including continuing to support her as she pursues her master’s degree. For Madison, family, friends, and OVR have helped her succeed, but the biggest support in her life has been her mom and her best friend.

Madison shared that having a disability often has many hidden costs, copays, minor medical bills, time off for appointments, and travel to/from appointments. All of these can take their toll both emotionally and monetarily. OVR funding, she said, has helped level the playing field for her by providing adaptations and financial assistance.

Her advice for others with disabilities who would like to pursue employment is to “get in contact with OVR. They are truly an underutilized resource. They can often help with things you did not even originally know you needed.”

Staff Shoutouts: Shawn Lasko and Raymond Grant, VR Counselors and LaShae Jeffers and Andrew Demjanenko, Supervising VR Counselors

Tiffany Weigle

When Tiffany Weigle, a mother of three, began working with OVR, she was an LPN but struggling to maintain employment as her multiple health issues, including pain and fatigue, made it difficult to complete the heavy physical demands of her job. She decided to pursue an associate RN degree that would limit direct contact work and shift her duties to involve more case management.

With OVR’s Johnstown BVRS office’s support, she undertook training at Penn West Clarion, while still working part time, and obtained her degree. Tiffany is currently working as an RN for Interim Healthcare with the goal of potentially looking into further schooling in the future as her health allows. What she loves best about her new career is being able to help people and advocate for them, especially in hospice.

Having a job not only provides for her family it also, “makes me feel like I am making a difference,” she said.

Tiffany’s family, friends, church members, coworkers, and colleagues have all helped her succeed on her employment journey. When asked what her advice is for others pursuing employment, she encouraged individuals “not to be afraid to ask for help. In school, with OVR, and in life, advocate for yourself.”

Staff Shoutouts: Raymond Grant, VR Counselor, and Sarah Weckoski, Supervising VR Counselor



Catherine

Catherine began working with OVR's Norristown BVRs office following a traumatic brain injury and rehabilitative care. With the OVR Norristown team's support, which included supported employment, assessments, financial aid for training, and counseling and guidance, she was able to identify her passion for caring for others and pursue an education in nursing. Today she is working full time as an RN!

Catherine describes being an RN as her "dream job," and what she likes best about it is both the freedom it gives her and the relationships she's been able to build with coworkers. She also shared that she feels "pride in telling people what I do."

For Catherine, having a job "means the world". She said that now, "I am able, financially, mentally, and physically, to live on my own and I feel like I have control over my life. I now feel like my condition does not define me. I am a person who lives with disabilities, who fought to get the upper hand on my disabilities, and I proved to those that underestimated me that I am able!"

She encourages other individuals with disabilities who are considering employment to make a plan and celebrate every achievement. "Going from dealing with my disability every day to including a job and responsibilities had a lot of little steps," she said. "I worked with my doctors, therapists, and my family to figure out what I wanted to do, what job type would make me happy. Then we looked at the requirements and made a plan for me to be able to accomplish those requirements. We celebrated every little accomplishment, from going to a full week of classes alone without an issue, passing an exam, getting the degree, and being offered a job."

Catherine credits her "entire village" with helping her succeed, including her VR Counselor; cognitive, physical, occupational, and emotional therapists; and her family and friends. One of her strategies was to remember her reasons for pursuing



employment. "I kept a list of reasons for why I was doing all of this hard work to motivate me to keep pushing."

Staff Shoutouts: Geni George and Jamie Luthy, VR Counselors; Neil Marzullo, VR Counselor (former); Susan Galyo, VR Counselor (retired); and Cheryl Novak, Policy, Staff Development & Training Division Chief

Jonathan Dilick

"My advice to individuals with disabilities seeking employment would be to never give up, don't doubt yourself, and don't be afraid to ask for help (BBVS)." – Jonathan

My story started in the summer of 2010. After completing my freshman year at Saint Francis University, I was planning on transferring to IUP the following year. During that summer, my life changed forever. I was diagnosed with a rare visual condition called Leber's Hereditary Optic Neuropathy (LHON). This condition severely altered my central vision and deemed me legally blind. After numerous ophthalmology appointments, I chose to take a semester off of college, to navigate this new journey. With the help of BBVS, I was provided with sponsorship and technology support (laptop, visual software, glasses, and others) that allowed me to return to school. The following spring, I attended IUP Northpointe to pursue a degree in education. After three semesters at Northpointe, I then attended IUP Main Campus (Indiana). For the next three and a half years, I worked tremendously hard, achieved a cumulative GPA of 3.55 (Magna Cum Laude), and received my bachelor's degree in health and physical education. In addition to my degree and teacher certification, I minored in sport management, received an athletic coaching certification, and won my graduating class departmental award (Outstanding Senior in teacher education).



After graduation from IUP, I was hired as a part-time health and physical education teacher at Divine Redeemer School (Ford City) and subbed day-to-day in Armstrong School District. Along with subbing and working at DRS, I also worked at the RGS

YMCA as an adaptive instructor (fall, winter, and spring) and a day camp counselor (summer).

Four years went by, and I had no luck getting hired full time in my local school district as a health and PE teacher. I then decided to contact BBVS to inform them that I planned on going back to school to pursue a master's degree in special education. BBVS reopened my case, and I was accepted to IUP's graduate program. In two and a half years, I received my master's degree and special education K-12 teacher certification. During that time, I maintained a 3.90 GPA. While pursuing my master's degree (online), I continued to substitute for Armstrong and work at the RGS YMCA.

In the fall of 2022, I was presented with the opportunity to work as a long-term special education teacher at Armstrong Jr./Sr. High School. It was a tremendous experience and part way through the year, a position became available. This was my third interview and I felt more prepared than ever! A few weeks went by, and I received one of the best phone calls of my life. The ASD HR director informed me that I got the job! The position was a 7-12 learning support job at West Shamokin Jr./Sr. High School. I finished the final marking period at West Shamokin, and I've been there since. My favorite part about my job as a learning support (special education) teacher is providing the support that my students need and my everyday interactions with them.

My dream of being a full-time teacher had come true! It may not have been the easiest journey, but it was well worth the ride. Having a full-time teaching job makes me feel accomplished and allows me to provide a stable income for my family. I don't have to worry about working multiple jobs just to get by. Thank you BBVS for being such a tremendous support throughout my journey!

Staff Shoutouts: Michelle Markle, VR Counselor; James McNeil and Allison Mervis, VR Counselors (former); and Kiriam Harney, Orientation & Mobility Specialist

Partner Shoutouts: Dr. Paul Freeman (Low Vision Specialist - Allegheny General), Michele (Dr. Freeman's Assistant), Dr. Erik Happ (Allegheny General Ophthalmologist), and Gary Looker (AT instructor)

Cassandra Drumm

Cassandra Drumm applied for OVR services in 2021 while employed as a pre-school teacher with Community Action Partnership in Pequea Valley. She came to OVR for support in maintaining her job as she had faced challenges the previous school year understanding students during COVID with masking. OVR's York BVRs team provided Cassandra with a hearing evaluation and also assisted her with getting new hearing aids and supplies. As a result, her communication with students and teachers improved.



During the summer of 2023, Cassandra applied for a new position with Community Action Partnership and was hired. She is now employed as a social/emotional learning and disability specialist for the school.

What she loves about her job is that she is "working at a place where I get to advocate for children with disabilities and work with them and their families every day." For Cassandra, her job allows her to invest in the community that invested in her. "I am able to serve children and families from poverty who have disabilities and give them the encouragement, support, and tools they need to succeed just like many have done for me throughout my life," said Cassandra. "My job brings me so much fulfillment and joy in life as I give back to others."

Cassandra encourages other individuals with disabilities who are considering employment to "be true to who you are, and don't let others make you feel like you should have to hide your disability or feel lesser because of it."

It is through everyone's support, Cassandra said, including her family, friends, teachers, OVR staff, and service providers, that she has been able to "continue to succeed." Of her family and friends support she said that they "have supported and encouraged me through every step and taught me not to hold myself back or let anything stop me from achieving my goals."

Staff Shoutouts: Kelsey Hurst, VR Counselor

Michael Harchick



Michael has been employed as a teacher since 1980 and has worked with OVR's BBVS throughout his teaching career to help maintain his employment. In 2022, he reached out to BBVS to obtain recommendations for new technology for job retention, and OVR's Altoona BBVS team assisted him with vision rehabilitation therapy services; counseling and guidance; a low vision evaluation and devices; an assistive technology evaluation, training, and devices; and job retention services. With his new technology, Michael was able to maintain his teaching job! What he likes best about his job is, simply, "being around the kids." He credits his parents, wife, and college coach with helping him succeed over the years and overcome barriers. Having a job has meant both financial security and has given him a purpose. It also

allows him to help out, which he enjoys.

His advice for other individuals with disabilities considering employment is to not "let any obstacles in front of you limit you. Find your way around them and don't be embarrassed when you need help."

For students with disabilities, he encourages them to "think positively, use your technology, earn your grades."

Staff Shoutouts: Nicole Fisher, VR Counselor; Sarah Krug, Vision Rehabilitation Therapist; and Amanda Turner, VR Supervisor

Madison Weaver

Madison Weaver knew from an early age that she wanted to become a teacher like her mother. While in high school, she applied for OVR services to support her in achieving that goal. In 2019, she graduated from New Oxford High School.

OVR's York BVRS team provided testing and an assistive technology evaluation for her to receive recommendations for accommodations at college and recommendations for assistive technology that aided her in completing her educational goals.

After graduation from college, Madison obtained full time employment as a kindergarten teacher in the Conewago Valley School District, the district she was educated in. What she loves about being a kindergarten teacher is "seeing all that they [the students] have learned in their first year of school and to see the growth in them." Her purpose in teaching students is "to give love, support them in things they may be missing in their home lives, and to see their smiles every day."



Madison shared that one of her keys to success in employment and education has been that she was an advocate for herself and her needs in college. Her advice for other individuals with disabilities considering employment is to "not let their disability hold them back." She adds that "they should be kind to themselves and realize that it takes everyone some time to learn new things."

Having a therapist, she shared, "really helped me frame things in my life and to think about things differently."

Having a job in her dream career means so much to Madison. It's given her financial benefits, as well as purpose. "While the financial benefits of having a job are great," she said, "having a job that I love offers me so much more than just money. I have a strong faith and believe that God always puts you on the path that you should be on. I found my path with my students as their teacher."

Staff Shoutouts: Brady Smith Landis, VR Counselor