I realize it was more than likely a problem of word count. Or of column width. ("Providers Agree System is Troubled," Providence Journal. Jan. 16, 2014, A1-2) Nonetheless, when direct attribution is provided, the quote should be accurate. Although I had no problem with the paraphrased paragraph that preceded the quote, I had a big problem with the quote: “The problem was he was only working with the disabled,” she said. “I believed he was capable of more.”

What’s the big deal? What’s the difference between saying “people with disabilities,” and its compressed counterpart, “the disabled” (to the general public at least)? Does anyone remember hearing Donald Trump say “the blacks?” Or Stephen Colbert’s character say “the gays?” Those phrases are offensive. The difference is that “the disabled”, like “the blacks,” and “the gays,” are people first! None of these groups are individuals who should be lumped together by having one aspect of their persona in common.
Also, the juxtaposition of the two quoted sentences left out what I said in between. The quote used in the article implies I believed my son was too good, or too smart, simply to be working with “the disabled.” What I actually said was that at a previous placement in an agency, my son’s only opportunities for work were places with which the agency had contracts. In other words, he could sit in the agency itself and count transparencies; he could go out with the dog-walking crew, or the landscaping crew, or the group cleaning the bathrooms in the Narragansett Police Station, all of this contracted work. What he was not able to do successfully, because of poorly trained and underpaid job coaches, was to gain non-segregated competitive employment. That is what I believed my son, Andrew Lamson, to be capable of. When the woman who ran the vocational program turned to me at the annual ISP (Individual Support Program) and said I should be happy, because Andrew earned more than any other worker, I replied, “Really? Would you be happy earning $40 a week?”

And what I was explaining to the reporter at the RI Developmental Disabilities Council meeting last week was that only six months into using self-directed supports, my son gained competitive employment, and has been working at the same two part-time jobs for eighteen months now. And making more than minimum wage.

*What are self-directed supports?* Self-directed supports eliminate “the middleman.” The user, in this case, my son, uses his Medicaid dollars to hire support staff. He chooses how much to pay them per hour, so that they can be paid a living wage. The money goes directly to his employees, through one of the four fiscal intermediary agencies in Rhode Island. No money is swallowed up by an agency, which can then afford to pay only minimum wage or slightly above to its staff, because it has to pay “administrators.” In other words, my son, like others using self-directed supports, is a genuine job creator! His Medicaid dollars go directly to people who use the money to consume the goods that keep their families going, and therefore, right into the local economy.

No one should be segregated; no one should be profiled: not in education, not in housing, not in employment. No one should be stopped unnecessarily by law enforcement. And that is what I was trying to tell the reporter: not that my son was above working with other people with disabilities, but that all people with disabilities have the right to be integrated into various environments.

*My hope is that one day, “people with disabilities” will simply be “people.” Never “the disabled.”*

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