

Helping Young People with Disabilities Find Their Passion: *Andraéa LaVant's Story*

Andraéa LaVant took her position at the front of a gymnasium full of parents who did not know what to expect from Camp Starfish's "Passion Show." Camp Starfish is a Girl Scout camp in Rockville, MD, where girls with developmental disabilities can make friends and discover new experiences in a supportive environment. As the Inclusion Specialist for the Girl Scout Council of the Nation's Capital (GSCNC), Andraéa acts as a mentor to teens. She knows first-hand what it is like to negotiate adolescence with a disability. As a young woman with muscular dystrophy who successfully navigated college and the workforce, Andraéa is a strong role model for the girls. At 30, she is young enough to remember the importance of establishing a sense of one's identity early on. Too often, Andraéa notes, children can grow up defined by their disability. Camp Starfish's Passion Show was one of many self-awareness exercises designed to help the girls learn about the skills and the friendships they are capable of having. It was a celebration of each child's "passion," and each camper began a tentative walk down the makeshift runway knowing that Andraéa and the other girls at Starfish had her back. Each prepared throughout the week by exploring those things that bring her joy and the special talents that make her unique. Drawing the girls out requires a level of patience and intuition that can be hard to find. Andraéa possesses these valuable attributes, making her well-suited to her role.

She donned a feather boa for the occasion and moved through the crowd in a power wheelchair, connecting with the audience and modeling the leadership qualities she hopes to cultivate in her campers. "Let's give it up for Jane!" she shouted from a microphone.



Mentoring Builds a Foundation for Success

Research on [positive youth development](#) programs has long demonstrated that youth benefit from close, caring relationships with adults who serve as positive role models. Today, millions continue to lack supportive, sustained relationships with caring adults. Mentoring—which matches youth or "mentees" with responsible, caring "mentors" usually adults—has been growing in popularity as both a prevention and intervention strategy over the past decades. Mentoring relationships can be formal or informal, but the essential components include creating caring, empathetic, consistent and long-lasting relationships, often with some combination of role modeling, teaching and advising.

Youth Programs Resource: The Interagency Working Group on Youth Programs (IWGYP) is composed of representatives from 18 federal agencies that support programs and services focusing on youth. Social Security is part of this collaborative, which promotes positive, healthy outcomes for youth. A variety of support resources, including mentoring programs for youth, can be found online at [FindYouthInfo.gov](#).

Jane, a young lady with autism, is uneasy in crowded spaces. Her face emerged from stage right, staring at the large group before her with wide eyes. Timidly clutching a baseball bat and glove, she was unsure about walking out in front of all those people staring at her. Andraéa encouraged Jane with a gesture and continued, *“Jane enjoys baseball and has a memory for statistics and facts that would blow you away!”*

As cheers erupted from each side of the runway, Jane's posture straightened. The acknowledgement from the room acted like a magnetic force that pulled her from the sidelines. She walked with purpose, and by the time she reached the end of the runway, reversed direction with a sassy pivot before returning to sit by fellow campers. Starfish was a positive experience, according to Jane's mother, who had not seen her daughter settle in so comfortably with peers before. For some young people with developmental disabilities, social skills are a critical pre-requisite to personal and professional achievements.

From Mentee to Mentor

Andraéa was fortunate to grow up with parents who were strong role models, who taught her that her disability did not have to prevent her from pursuing college and satisfying work, or other activities that brought her fulfillment. She received Supplemental Security Income (SSI) but was determined to earn enough on her own so she would not have to rely on a fixed income.

Ticket to Work and Work Incentives

After earning a bachelor's degree from Middle Tennessee State University in 2006, Andraéa considered how she would transition from school to the workforce. She did some research online and found information on Social Security's website about employment and disability benefits (see benefits counseling box below). Andraéa learned she was eligible to receive free employment support services such as career counseling and help with a job hunt. Through Social Security's Ticket to Work program, state Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) agencies and authorized providers known as “Employment Networks” (ENs) help recipients of Social Security disability benefits (age 18 through 64) prepare for, find and maintain employment. The program is best suited for people like Andraéa who are committed to achieving financial independence through eventual full-time employment.

Work Incentive Spotlight: The Student Earned Income Exclusion

Andraéa first worked with her state VR agency when she finished high school, and learned she was eligible for a Social Security Work Incentive called the Student Earned Income Exclusion (SEIE). This rule allows employed SSI recipients who are regularly attending school to earn up to \$1,730 per month (a maximum of \$6,960 per year in 2013) that will not be counted as earnings when Social Security determines the SSI cash benefit. VR helped Andraéa find the resources to pay for part of her college tuition, textbooks, and a personal care attendant as well.

For more information about the SEIE and other Work Incentives, consult a benefits counselor. You can also read [The Redbook](#), Social Security's Guide to Work Incentives at www.socialsecurity.gov/redbook.

Andraéa found help at her state VR agency. Together, Andraéa and her VR counselor developed an Individualized Plan for Employment, a roadmap to help her reach her goals. While she made progress toward these goals, Andraéa did not have to undergo Social Security's medical Continuing Disability Reviews (CDR). The VR counselor also helped her learn about Social Security rules called Work Incentives. Work Incentives make it easier for adults with disabilities to enhance their job skills and gain work experience while receiving health care and some Social Security cash benefits. She was particularly relieved to learn that after she is employed, her Medicaid coverage could continue, even if her earnings from work became too high for an SSI cash payment. This Work Incentive, known as “Medicaid While Working” (or 1619b) allowed Andraéa to focus on pursuing employment without worrying about losing her healthcare coverage. There are many different Work Incentives available to help people go to work. As each individual's circumstances are different, job-seekers are encouraged to consult a benefits counselor to explore Work Incentives.

Find Benefits Counseling Help

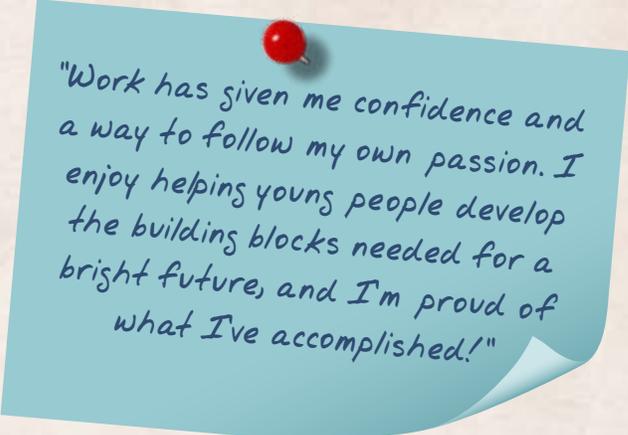
Benefits counselors (also known as benefits advisors) are professionals who can explain what employment would mean for your Social Security benefits. Some professionals who have completed Social Security-sponsored training that qualifies them to offer benefits counseling are known as “Community Work Incentives Coordinators” (or CWICs). Community based organizations known as “Work Incentives Planning and Assistance projects” (WIPA) have CWICs on staff that can help you make informed decisions about employment. Some ENs also have CWICs on staff.

To find a provider that offers benefits counseling, visit www.socialsecurity.gov/work/ and use the “Find Help” tool. Use the Advanced Search feature to pinpoint services tailored to you. Select “Work Incentives Counseling” on the services menu to begin your search. All WIPA projects offer benefits counseling, but not all ENs have benefits advisors on staff. Those that do will have an EN Profile that indicates there is a “benefits advisor on staff.”

For help, call the Ticket to Work Help Line at **1-866-968-7842 (V)** or **1-866-833-2967 (TTY)**.

Pathway to a bright future

With help from her state VR agency in 2007, Andraéa began her career as a Youth Development Specialist at AmeriCorps, where she helped young people explore career options and improve their pathways to opportunity. While she developed skills in career counseling, Andraéa replaced her SSI payments with a much larger paycheck. By 2011, she had developed a talent for inspiring others and went to work for GSCNC as an Inclusion Specialist.



"Work has given me confidence and a way to follow my own passion. I enjoy helping young people develop the building blocks needed for a bright future, and I'm proud of what I've accomplished!"

