

Working From a New Angle

Debra Gabriel's Story

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From a reclined position at her desk, Debra Gabriel is focused on the computer screen that hovers a few feet in front of her. She's designing an online help topic for a software company in Phoenix. A special chair allows her to work while almost lying down. It's a new angle on work she didn't imagine she could find after an injury landed her on her back. Resolve and an ability to solve problems creatively helped Debra get back to the fast-paced work environment she enjoys. She began her journey back to a fulfilling career with Social Security's Ticket to Work, an employment support program for adults with disabilities.

Blind-sided

Debra is a devoted mother with a talent for simplifying complex information. A variety of organizations hire her as a consultant to develop web sites that are easy to use and understand. As a technical writer and software usability specialist, Debra helps her clients communicate with their customers. Her work allows people to find information online in less time. She also has a unique understanding of how others learn, and has developed teaching tools to improve education programs for a non-profit group. As technology expanded, so did Debra's career. Then in 2002, her life changed dramatically.

A severe back injury hit hard, launching Debra into a six-year struggle to recover from multiple surgeries, chronic pain, and fatigue. At one point during her health crisis, she slipped into a coma. The condition cost her a job, financial stability, and almost took her life. It was a dark time. Debra felt like she had lost control of her life. But she never considered giving up on her future. She fought hard to recover. In the hospital, she devoted herself to physical therapy that would improve her mobility and keep her out of a nursing home. Returning home was no small achievement. Still, the long road back to a more stable life lay ahead.

Role model

Unable to work, Debra was grateful for the healthcare coverage and Social Security Disability (SSDI) cash benefits she received from Social Security. Yet the financial strain of living on SSDI created its own stress. She went into debt supporting herself and her two daughters, and knew this situation could not continue. Debra's daughters needed her and she was determined to do what was necessary to improve their lifestyle. But she knew she'd need extra support to return to work.

“I had to get better and get back to work. I didn't want my children to see me quit, give up, or not do the best I could. I was conscious of being a positive role model. I think they have learned the value of persistence, hard work, and doing one's best. This experience taught me and my daughters that it is okay to ask for help. I think that's a really important thing people are afraid to do because it means taking risks. My older kid got it. Now she is a National Merit Scholar with a full ride to college! I'm so proud of her.”

Taking a shot at a better future

Despite chronic fatigue, pain and limited mobility, Debra felt she was ready to go back to work one step at a time. She was aware of limitations in her ability to focus and organize her thoughts after the coma. As her recovery continued, it was unclear whether employment would be feasible. Debra wondered if she would be able to do the type of work she did before she was injured. What would happen if her health problems interfered with long-term employment?

“When I first considered going back to work, I didn't know what the outcome would be. The critical illness that put me in a coma involved brain swelling. Cognitively, I was not where I



am now and felt uncertain. I was concerned about protecting my benefits. I have a degenerative condition and I didn't want to lose my lifeline."

Debra knew she needed help understanding how work would affect her SSDI benefits. She consulted a certified benefits counselor after attending a Work Incentives Seminar Event (WISE). WISE events are available as free online webinars. Participants learn about important rules that apply to employment and Social Security disability benefits. These rules, known as "Work Incentives," make it easier for adults with disabilities to enhance their job skills through education, training and work experience. While preparing to find and sustain employment, SSDI and SSI recipients can still receive Medicaid or Medicare coverage and some cash benefits from Social Security.

Work Incentives allowed Debra to summon the courage to take a chance on her future. She learned that her healthcare coverage and monthly benefit would continue during the transition to work. The "Trial Work Period" (for SSDI recipients) allowed her to get trained and test her ability to work for at least 9 months while receiving cash benefits. Debra was also concerned about whether her condition would be compatible with working in an office environment or whether her disability would interfere over time. Learning about a Work Incentive called "Expedited Reinstatement" helped. Expedited Reinstatement might allow Social Security to start Debra's benefits again without a new application, if she has to stop working because of her disability within 5 years.

The Trial Work Period (TWP) and Expedited Reinstatement (EXR) are just two of 20 Work Incentives that can help people who receive Social Security disability benefits return to work or work for the very first time. Certified benefits counselors at authorized organizations called "Work Incentives Planning & Assistance projects" (WIPA) are available to help people understand these options and determine which may be applicable to their unique situation.

Debra's counselor also told her about the Ticket to Work program. Ticket to Work is voluntary and offers a selection of free employment support services to people (age 18 through 64) who receive Social Security disability benefits. The program is best suited for people who are committed to achieving self-sufficiency through eventual full-time employment.

"Learning about Ticket to Work and Work Incentives helped me see that maybe I could actually dig out of the hole I was in."

Debra sought help from Arizona Bridge to Independent Living (ABIL), just one of 1,300+ authorized providers known as Employment Networks (or ENs). ENs and state vocational rehabilitation agencies offer a range of services, including vocational training, career counseling, job coaching and ongoing support services. Debra and her EN developed an Individual Work Plan (IWP) to serve as a road-map for her to reach her employment goals. Armed with support and a plan, she was ready to explore her employment options.

Rebuilding

Debra's stepping stone was a part-time job developing educational curricula for a non-profit organization. She devoted herself to her work, and to exercises that would help restore both physical and cognitive function. Debra was encouraged by the progress she made and found creative ways to accommodate her back injury as she rebuilt her career.

"I have a reclining chair – the kind that has a separate ottoman", she says. "It is set up so I can swing it around, rest my feet on the desk chair, adjust my screen, and work in a reclined position!"

Today, Debra is an independent contractor, working on projects for several clients. In spite of a slow economy, many organizations have benefited from Debra's skills since her return to the workforce in 2008. She has applied her aptitude for creative problem-solving to new strategies for working around her disability, and continues to present outstanding work to satisfied clients. Seven contracts have brought her a range of project experience, and she enjoys having choices that were not possible when living on benefits. She left Social Security's disability benefits behind in 2008, and has not looked back.

"It's very satisfying to be able to pay one's bills and get out of debt. For the first time in many years, I'm moving in a positive direction and building self-esteem. I had time while I was healing to think about the work I do, and I'm blessed to have the opportunity to work for ethical companies that make a positive impact on people's lives."

Ticket to Work and Work Incentives supported Debra's efforts to regain her confidence through work. Debra has a healthier, socially active lifestyle beyond what she envisioned before her journey back to self-sufficiency. Debra believes in herself, and in the future she wants for her daughters. She knows it is within reach.

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Ticket to Work and Work Incentives helped Debra find her path to self-sufficiency. Find yours. Visit www.socialsecurity.gov/work or call **1-866-968-7842 (V)** or **1-866-833-2967 (TTY/TDD)** to learn more.

