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Behavior Support Services in the Workplace

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Angela Yeager: Hi. This is Angela Yeager, and welcome to the Oregon Employment First podcast. We are taping live today from the Breaking Barriers Conference in Redmond, Oregon, and I'm really excited to have here with me Stephanie Hunter, who is a behavior support professional with the Opportunity Foundation of Central Oregon. Welcome Stephanie.

Stephanie Hunter: Thank you Angela.

Angela Yeager: So Stephanie, tell us how you became a behavior support professional.

Stephanie Hunter: Well, I started, um, working at an agency, um, in a residential home as a direct support staff in 1999.

Angela Yeager: 1999, okay.

Stephanie Hunter: And, uh –

Angela Yeager: She looks very young, for those of you, who are only, who can only hear.

Stephanie Hunter: Um, and so, and that agency was very supportive of people, you know, who had, you know, ambition and moxy, and I worked my way from, you know, DSP – I was a program director. I was a skills trainer for youth and proctor care, and, um, a behavior specialist position

opened up, and I actually didn't think I was qualified for it, but I applied for it, so they knew I was interested. And, um, and then I didn't get the job, but they knew I was interested, so later on, um, when there was an open position, um, I was able to become a behavior professional.

Angela Yeager: And why were you, why, why were you interested?

Stephanie Hunter: Well, I, you know, some of us are just lifers, I guess? Like, I, I got the job in a residential home to pay my bills. I, I had to pay my rent, and I, and my roommate was like, I can get you a job. Um, didn't think caregiving was gonna be, um, you know, my cup of tea, but I was completely wrong. I, from the first day, I was like this is great. And I learned more and more about employment and, um, just all the different options available. And I, residential was not the best fit for me. I'm more of a get-out-and-go kind of a person, so, um, so I started kinda working towards more active roles. Um, but the behavior piece – my, my, it's funny 'cause my very, very first email ever – I opened an email account because I wanted to help people learn how to communicate that I supported, so I, um, I went to the library, and I was like I need, you know, something on picture-exchange communication system, and they're like we can email you. I don't have an email account, so I started a email account. My very first email is like a journal article on how to develop communication systems.

Angela Yeager: Oh wow, so –

Stephanie Hunter: Yeah.

Angela Yeager: So, right, from the very beginning, your very first email that you ever had – that's incredible. So, I, so you've been doing this work then essentially since 1999?

Stephanie Hunter: Yeah, or, yeah.

Angela Yeager: So, so for a while. So, uh, tell me about how your, your current job at Opportunity Foundation and, and what does your job entail?

Stephanie Hunter: I actually, um, when I first started, I was, um, the behavior professional for a children's residential home, um, and I also did

community behavior support. And now I primarily do community behavior support. Um, so, um, not in-agency support, but I work with families, I work with foster providers, um, um, in family homes or in foster homes.

Angela Yeager: So for people that are listening that don't know what that means even though it, so what does that mean to, to do community living support there, that, as you mentioned.

Stephanie Hunter: Great question. So, um, um, if someone has in there, um, individual support plan, um, positive behavior support hours, um, um, OR570, OR310 for our code people, right? Um, then they can, um, get that service from a, a qualified provider, who meets the ODDS rules to be able to provide that support. Um, so, um, they, the, the service coordinator at the, um, developmental disability program would – how it works here, locally, is they send us an intake request.

Angela Yeager: Okay.

Stephanie Hunter: And then I'm actually the one who assigns those. We have a behavior team. And so I take the intake requests and manage the lists, and then I help find goodness of fit and who might be the best person to meet the needs of a certain, you know, family or individual.

Angela Yeager: Interesting, so you have a whole behavior team, and are you essentially sort of the head of that team, then? You said you them, the requests in and figure out who's gonna be a good fit.

Stephanie Hunter: Actually, well, um, I have a supervisor, who supervises our entire behavior team. I do that part of –

Angela Yeager: Oh, okay.

Stephanie Hunter: – um, the, you know, just the community stuff. Not the in-agency stuff.

Angela Yeager: Interesting. Yeah, this is fascinating.

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Angela Yeager: So, how do you, how do you determine good fit, as you mentioned?

Stephanie Hunter: Uh, that's a, you, you know, it's a good question. I mean, we – and, and that's one of the things that we are all encouraged as behavior professionals to widen our scope, but also honor our scope. So, um, you know, someone on our team is very skilled with people who are older, um, who have, um, you know, maybe certain diagnoses or life experiences, I would – um, and the, there is someone on our team, who, she, she's like I would rather work with adults. Kids are just not, you know, it's not my skill set.

Angela Yeager: Right.

Stephanie Hunter: I would never assign her a child.

Angela Yeager: Okay.

Stephanie Hunter: Um, so, so that's, so then, um, or, uh, teenage boys.

Angela Yeager: Mm hmm.

Stephanie Hunter: Uh, you know, that –

Angela Yeager: Yes.

Stephanie Hunter: – there's a, that's a certain skill set.

Angela Yeager: Right. Just in general, in life, right? Yeah.

Stephanie Hunter: Yeah.

Angela Yeager: Right. So, um, how, in the terms of the work environment – course this is Employment First – how can behavior supports be used in the work environment?

Stephanie Hunter: Um, you know that is, um – and I, I wanna say, I feel like it's an untapped resource, at least, and that's me speaking personally because, um, and I was trained, um, on how to, um, organize work environments and help with, um, positive behavior supports in that environment, um, and I think that, um, there's a lot that we can provide. One is just adapting the environment, so walking into an environment and being like, you know, that's gonna be a trigger. That's gonna be a distraction. Is there ways that we can reduce clutter, reduce noise, reduce triggers in this environment. Um, looking at safety needs, supervision needs, um, visual support. So, how can we make this work make sense for this person, um, to the way that they learn, the way that they, you know, think. Um, and then also just the social piece because the goal is that you have less paid support and more natural support.

Angela Yeager: Right.

Stephanie Hunter: So, um, how, you know, providing training for the coworkers or, um, or the paid support so they are modeling that for the, the natural supports in, in that environment, and the person is, you know, learning how to be, be a part of a work environment.

Angela Yeager: Right. So, to give people, um, that are listening a picture, um, can you give an example of how positive behavior supports have helped someone on the job.

Stephanie Hunter: You know, um, I have to be honest that I haven't had a, like I have all this training in, in organizing environments and I, when I, I don't have an answer to, to that question, and like I don't have an anecdote, I guess, to share in particular. Um, but, um, other than to kinda generally like, if there's, um, you know like I was saying, if there's a visual support need, if there's an environmental need –

Angela Yeager: Mm hmm.

Stephanie Hunter: – um –

Angela Yeager: Well, for instance here at the conference, it, you know this is a loud environment. There's, you know, 500 people here, and I notice that they mentioned that they had a quiet space set up, so that's the kind of thing, you know, in the workplace, if you were, you know, looking at the person's needs, uh, maybe they work in a very busy environment, and they need a quiet space, would that be something that you -

Stephanie Hunter: Absolutely.

Angela Yeager: Yeah, that you could help them with?

Stephanie Hunter: And actually, thinking, um, 'cause I'm also a foster, um, parent for a young man who is, um, transition age, and I'm, I'm thinking in terms of, um, 'cause he works at the school store, and, um, he gets very, very distracted by media, and so over the Christmas season, they had, uh, movies running.

Angela Yeager: Mm hmm.

Stephanie Hunter: And he would just freeze and stop working.

Angela Yeager: Yeah.

Stephanie Hunter: So, those are the kinds of things where I'm like okay, when I'm thinking about supporting him when he moves into, you know, employment, like environments where if there is that distraction, how can we reduce it versus thinking how do we, how do I just teach him to, you know, not look at that TV. Like, it's like how do we make the environment support him because that distraction is gonna be there.

Angela Yeager: Right.

Stephanie Hunter: But maybe we can remove it, minimize it.

Angela Yeager: Right. You necessarily can't remove the TV, but you might be able to –

Stephanie Hunter: There, there –

Angela Yeager: – might be some things to do, yeah.

Stephanie Hunter: Yeah, I would be, be thinking along those lines.

Angela Yeager: I definitely could, and I'm a movie person. If there was a movie going on at my desk, that would be it. That's all I'd be looking at, so I can relate with that.

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Angela Yeager: So, um, you mentioned, and I know your foster son, um, getting ready to, you know, in transition services, and then you, I think you, you told me that you also have another child, who's going to be entering transition services at some point possibly?

Stephanie Hunter: Yes.

Angela Yeager: So, you know, can you talk about early preparation for the work force and what, you know, people, families might be, you know, wanting to think about?

Stephanie Hunter: Yeah, well, with, you know, my daughter, um, you know, I've been, um, planting that seed since she was really young. Um, I, when she was first diagnosed, I, um, became involved in family networks. I went through this amazing training called partners in policy making, which is just about how to change the entire landscape to be more inclusive, um,

leadership skills. So, I've been really kind of raising her to see disability as an attribute, um, not as, you know, but I also kinda want her to like own it as part of her identity as well.

Angela Yeager: Mm hmm. That's great.

Stephanie Hunter: So I've been kinda planting those seeds, um, that, you know, like strengths and gifts, you know, so I've been raising her with those values, and she has been able to, like she's, um, she's a camp counselor at Camp Tamarac.

Angela Yeager: Nice.

Stephanie Hunter: Um, that was her first paid job last summer, and she's great at it. Like, I'm like oh my goodness, and like I think just keeping that on the table, like you can do anything, um, but, but, you know, don't, um, you know, hide your disability. You know, own it. You know, have it be, you know it's part of who you are.

Angela Yeager: Mm hmm.

Stephanie Hunter: Um, whereas my foster son, I'm just starting to raise, you know, not raise him, but he's just come into my home, um, so he, um, so I'm just getting started with him, and the conversations at first were, you know, he was like well I'm gonna work at the Opportunity Foundation Thrift Store, which – and I was like, that would be a great first job –

Angela Yeager: But then moving on, yeah, to other things, right?

Stephanie Hunter: Yeah.

Angela Yeager: Yeah.

Stephanie Hunter: So, I've been mostly focusing with him on, um, being, that, um, transition from high school to the transition program. A lot of the work that I work with as a, um, behavior professional, they, they're like when I graduate I'm done, and they are not ready for transition. They, you know, they don't want to transition. They feel like they're done with

school, so I'm just keeping him excited about, like the after high school, you get to – and now he, that's his language now too.

Angela Yeager: Mm hmm.

Stephanie Hunter: He's talking about making his, he says his fast stacks that he's gonna make at his job, as in all the things he's gonna buy with his first paycheck and –

Angela Yeager: Nice.

Stephanie Hunter: Yeah.

Angela Yeager: Yeah, so you're getting him excited about that paycheck, which is –

Stephanie Hunter: Ye, yes.

Angela Yeager: – which is really exciting. So, you've been doing this a while, but, um, you still seem really excited and enthusiastic about the work, so what is your favorite part of your job?

Stephanie Hunter: You know, I, I really, you know, helping people, um, see, see the strengths and gifts in, you know, their child or themselves. Um, and, you know, so much is, there's so, again, so much negativity and what you can't do, and, um, I do a lot of reframing in conversations where, um, you know like, you know, well they're, you know, they're really manipulative. I'm like wow, they've got a lot of skills in, you know, seeing details. They're tenacious, per, you know, persistent. That's great. You know what they, that we could channel that into?

Angela Yeager: Mm hmm. Yeah.

Stephanie Hunter: So, so helping to reframe conversations, helping, uh, people see the best in themselves and their, and their child.

Angela Yeager: That's awesome. Well, thank you so much Stephanie, for joining us on the podcast. Once again, this is the

Employment First Podcast. You can find us on the first and third Tuesdays of each month. Thank you for joining us.

Stephanie Hunter: Thanks for having me.

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