

Hugo Perez puts down Oregon, career roots



Soon after Hugo Perez graduated from college and moved 3,000 miles from the East Coast to Oregon, he had a decision to make that most new graduates would envy: Which of two excellent job offers in his civil engineering field should he take?

Hugo, who is Deaf, opted to accept an engineering specialist position at the Oregon Department of Transportation last spring. ODOT chose Hugo for his skills, which he honed during courses at the Rochester Institute of Technology and two internships where he created a 3-D model of the museum at the Rochester School for the Deaf and redesigned various parts of a bridge with AutoCAD for the Massachusetts Department of Transportation.

After a successful stint at ODOT, Hugo furthered his career by accepting a structural design position at the Portland office of SSOE Group, a global project delivery firm for architecture, engineering and construction management. His job started Dec. 4, 2017.

Two role models influenced Hugo to excel in his field. One was his former high school teacher, Susan Margolin, who encouraged him to use his exceptional math and science skills in a career. The second was his father, Lorenzo Martinez, who took Hugo to construction jobs and “taught me how to structure with a brick and masonry, how to use a measuring tape and how to read a blueprint.” Although his father never learned sign language, they had a special father-son bond.

Vocational Rehabilitation and its partners have supported Hugo throughout his job search journey, but Hugo led the way. In February 2017, he connected with VR Counselor Dan Franks at the Beaverton Office. Dan brought on Castle Vocational Services President and Job Developer Bruce Castle. “Hugo steered the ship,” Dan says. “He was clear about what he did and didn’t want.”

The mock interviews that Bruce provided helped Hugo practice how to answer possible questions. “It helped me be mentally clear and to the point in the interviews, to provide short and simple answers,” he says.

According to Bruce, “The central question employers want to answer in an interview with all candidates is, ‘Can I trust you?’ ‘Can I trust you to be competent, and benefit us, and not do harm to me or my business?’” Bruce says Hugo’s strong background and personal traits won over potential employers.

Two months after Hugo first came to VR, it all came together. He received two offers in his field: one from an up-and-coming private firm and the other from ODOT. “I weighed the pros and cons of both positions and decided ODOT was the best for me,” Hugo says. “Because of all the things the department does, there were a lot of career paths available to me.”

At ODOT, Hugo was part of a three-person team working on a report about making curb ramps and pedestrian signal push buttons as safe and helpful as possible and in line with the Americans with Disabilities Act’s legal requirements. The report will help ODOT plan future roads. The other two team members were motivated to learn sign language, so Hugo held a class every other Friday. “The team got used to asking questions and answering in sign language instead of writing notes. They often signed with and for me,” Hugo says.

A year after making that long trek from the East Coast, Hugo is a happy employee. "I'm enjoying it," he says of his ODOT experience and his new job. He also is happy with his adopted state. In May, he visited his native California. When the plane touched down in LA, he noticed how dry it was compared to Portland. "Oregon's my home. I'm an Oregonian now," he says.