

# Employment First

Success Story

## Rachel Esteve

Rachel achieves her career goals at Cadence Academy Preschool

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Rachel Esteve, 28, loves children.

“They are just so wriggly and cute,” she said, giggling. “I don’t know why. I just can’t get enough of babies.”

Now Rachel has landed her dream job taking care of children and infants at Cadence Academy Preschool in Portland’s Sellwood neighborhood. Rachel works 20 hours per week as a teacher assistant and started her job in February 2021 – during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Tabitha Williams, Employment Specialist with Trellis, Inc., worked with Rachel on her career goals. Rachel was one of the first graduates of the Career & Community Studies program at Portland State University. The program provides an inclusive, four-year college experience for students with an intellectual disability. People with intellectual disabilities who enroll in the program take two or three classes per term at PSU. Participants also do career exploration and participate in campus activities. At PSU, Rachel worked at Little Vikings, the onsite daycare center. She discovered her calling for working with children.



“During that time, Rachel had the job at PSU working with kids and had that experience,” said Mark Foster, Vocational Rehabilitation counselor. “With COVID, everything didn’t go according

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to plan so it took a while. We helped her pursue what she wanted. But it's because of Rachel's determination and hard work that she was able to realize this dream."

"When Rachel told me that she wanted to work in daycare, I thought this was going to be a tough sell," Tabitha added. "Rachel said, 'Whatever. I can do this.'"

It isn't easy to develop a job during any time, but during a pandemic it is much more challenging. Tabitha supported Rachel to fill out online applications at daycare centers in her neighborhood, but she knew it would take more to get her foot in the door. She started knocking on doors, and met Alana Hardy, director of Cadence Academy Preschool, who said she wanted to meet Rachel and give her an opportunity for an interview.

"For me, I knew it in my heart after meeting her that we needed to have Rachel here," Alana said. "It was so sweet to hear some of her answers to our standard interview questions, just the passion that she had for children, for wanting to help and wanting to learn more."

The original opening was working with school-age children during distance learning, which was the one area Rachel was most concerned about because older children "ask questions about why you are different, why you look different."

However, Rachel rose to the challenge and not only successfully worked with older kids but advanced to her primary goal – taking care of infants. Now she works as a "floater," helping any teacher with any age group.



"Rachel always had ambition. And as Rachel gained more confidence, we are able to give, with any employee, more responsibility," Alana said. "I remember the first day she was able to be in the infant room and just the joy on her face."

Rachel lives with a roommate in an apartment in the Sellwood neighborhood, where her family also lives. Rachel's mother, Ann Esteve, said she sees her daughter walking to work every day with a big smile on her face.

"We assumed she would get maybe three, six hours," Ann said. "When Tabitha told us it was going to be 20 hours a week, we were stunned. We helped Rachel revise her schedule a lot because she has a lot of activities and work needed to be front and center. Now this job is the focus of her life and everything else revolves around that."

In addition to working and spending time with family and friends, Rachel is an outgoing person. She has many activities, including a dance troupe that is on hold during the pandemic. Rachel wants employers and others to know that people like her with Down syndrome or any disability can contribute to the workforce.

“To find a job that accepts people with disabilities, that is huge,” Rachel said. “I feel really good about my job. I think it rocks. Every time I go to work, I’m so happy. I think it is part of the acceptance of a person like me to have a job.”

Rachel’s employment team includes Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor Mark Foster, Employment Specialist Tabitha Williams with Trellis, Personal Agent Stephanie Mullen with UCP Connections and Alana Hardy, School Director, Cadence Academy Preschool.

A [podcast with Rachel](#) and her team is online.