

The Americans with Disabilities Act at 22: A New Generation of Iowans Approaches the Labor Force with High Expectations

Good morning, my name is Emilea Hillman and I am the owner of Em's Coffee Co. in Independence, Iowa. Thank you for asking me to speak today.

Before I get into the details, I would you like you to know I am young business owner, with a great work ethic. I am 24 years old and when I was born many doctors told my mom I would not walk, talk or even feed myself – let alone become an entrepreneur. I was born with Agenesis of the Corpus Collosum. What this means, is that my corpus collosum is absent. The corpus collosum is the connective tissue of nerve fibers that connects the right and left side of the brain. My corpus collosum is gone; therefore each side of my brain works independently. Some things that require both sides of your brain to communicate are riding a bike, driving a car and even tying your shoes. I still learn things like everyone else; it just takes my brain a little bit longer.

I graduated from Independence High School in 2007. Throughout high school I participated in special education and was mainstreamed in class as much as possible; mainly for gym and choir. I started participating in Educational Based Career Education as a freshman where I gained experience at the local businesses such as Dairy Queen, the local nursing home and childcare facilities. I started earlier than most because my mom pushed the system. I would have liked to work while in high school or participate in internships, but those opportunities were not available.

After graduating from high school in May of 2007, I went to work in a sheltered workshop, as that was the only option available after graduation. In Independence, there were little to no supported employment programs that could provide me opportunities to find competitive employment in the community. Individuals who experience disabilities were and still are expected to work at the segregated workshop in Independence. I worked at the workshop Monday through Friday 8:00 a.m. – 3:00 p.m. hanging clothes. At the workshop I made around \$2.50 per hour. After nearly two years of working in segregated employment, I had a really bad day at work in February of 2009 and chose to quit

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– the workshop was no longer meeting my expectations. Though I made a lot of friends at the workshop, I did not build skills that would prepare me for working in the community. For example, I did not learn how to interact with customers. Instead, I was to work in the back room away from the customers.

After I quit at the sheltered workshop, I was unemployed for nearly six months while my family and I thought about employment opportunities for me. I decided I would start a coffee shop. Independence needed a coffee shop that would be welcoming to community meetings and sell a great cup of espresso. I knew I would like owning a coffee shop because I would be able to work with customers every day, whereas at the workshop I was not allowed to work with customers. I love working with people and the community on a daily basis. I'm a bit of a social butterfly.

It was difficult to start my own business as a lot went into it. There were some people that didn't think I could do it. I needed support to make it happen. I developed a business plan for my coffee shop with the support of my mom and Iowa Vocational Rehabilitation Services (IVRS). I then used my business plan to apply for grants through IVRS and the U.S. Department of Agriculture. I worked very closely with my local Work Incentive Planning and Assistance program (WIPA). WIPA was essential in supporting me to understand how I could own my own business and not lose my benefits. During the development period, I worked with my job coach to recover chairs we would use once the coffee shop opened, studied espresso drinks and researched pastries. My job coach also supported me in attending Barista School in Minnesota where I learned how to make espresso drinks. There we developed small accommodations for my espresso machine that would assist me in making drinks for future customers. Bottom line, I did everything anyone else would to open up their own coffee shop. After months of research, hard work and development, in December of 2009, I opened up my business, Em's Coffee Co.

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I currently employ six people at my coffee shop and I am an equal opportunity employer. I hire people with and without disabilities and pay at minimum wage. Em's Coffee Co. also sponsors our own Special Olympics team – we have a great group! I utilize Iowa's Consumer Choices Option (CCO) program, where I am able to cash in my Medicaid Waiver dollars and hire my own staff. I pay my job coaches through the CCO program. This allows me to choose my own staff. This has been very successful for me. Financially my coffee shop is doing well this year. I'm making a profit and projected to have a stable income in the future and become less reliant on benefits such as Supplemental Security Income. This has been an exciting year for me as I am becoming more independent in running my coffee shop every day, and in October, I will be celebrating one year in my own home.

It is hard for anyone to own their own business. I have my mom to support me with my business financials, my grandma is the head baker and I have great employees that work for me. I work at my coffee shop Monday through Friday from 6:30-2:00. Em's Coffee Co is open Monday through Friday from 8:30-5:00 and Saturdays from 7:00-2:00. We sell specialty drinks, ice cream, Panini sandwiches and fresh baked goods.

I love my coffee shop and owning my own business. I know my customers by name and I know what they drink. I also have had the opportunity to present at multiple conferences throughout the country to share my story with others. I am well known member of the Independence Chamber of Commerce and a respected business owner in Independence. I assure you, everyone can work.

Thank you for your time.