

Empowering Change: RI WINS (Workforce Investment & New Solutions)

RI WINS (Workforce Investment & New Solutions) is the name utilized by the RI Cross Disability Coalition for our DD Transformation Grant in collaboration with the RI Developmental Disabilities Council (RIDDC) and Skills for RI's Future. This newsletter provides information on the status of implementation of the goal areas within the project and efforts to educate and provide support to people with disabilities, staff from community agencies, and RI employers on creating sustainable change for meaningful and inclusive lives for individuals with disabilities.

Spotlight on Self-Employment

The RIDDC is proud to spotlight the inspiring journeys of three emerging entrepreneurs - Kimmie, Anne, and Matty - graduates of our Self-Employment Business Incubator program, funded by DLT's "Real Jobs RI" initiative. These talented individuals were among the first to showcase their work at Red White & Brew in Warwick, where they were also featured in our previous newsletters.

This Vendor Spotlight offers a deeper look into their businesses, their creativity, and their motivations. During that morning and afternoon at the café we sat down with each of them for light-hearted, yet thoughtful interviews - learning not only about the products they create, but also about the personal passions that fuel their entrepreneurial spirit.

Empowering Inclusive Employment: Rhode Island's Trailblazing Model for Disability Workforce Development

At a recent webinar in the Free Spring Webinar Series: Advancing Employment in Georgia, Rhode Island emerged as a shining example of what's possible when government agencies, advocacy organizations, and community partners collaborate to promote inclusive employment. The session highlighted the outstanding efforts of the Rhode Island Developmental Disability

Council (RIDDC), Looking Upwards, Project SEARCH and the Rhode Island Division of Labor and Training (DLT) "Real Jobs Rhode Island" initiative. Together, these partners are reshaping the employment landscape for people with disabilities by focusing on equity, entrepreneurship, and innovative workforce training.



Advancing Employment

Building a community for inclusive employment in Georgia

A Voice for Equity: Doug Crandell's National Leadership

The webinar was hosted and moderated by Doug Crandell, a nationally recognized advocate for disability employment and a Senior Consultant at the Institute on Human Development and Disability at the University of Georgia. With decades of experience advancing competitive integrated employment, Crandell has been a driving force behind connecting states, programs, and innovators working toward inclusive economies.

His warm, practical, and justice-focused moderation kept the session grounded in the real impact this work has on individuals and families. As Crandell noted during the webinar:

"Disability, addiction, mental health—these are natural parts of being a human being. And when we help people connect meaningfully to work, we're not just building careers—we're building equity."

This sentiment perfectly encapsulates the work being done in Rhode Island—and why it matters nationally.



Matt Weldon - Director of DLT

Real Jobs Rhode Island: From “Train and Pray” to Demand-Driven Success

As Matt Weldon, Director of DLT, explained, the state’s workforce development strategy underwent a radical transformation in 2015. Rhode Island moved from the outdated “train and pray” model—where job seekers were trained and then left to hope for employment—to a “sector-based, demand-driven approach.” The result: “Real Jobs Rhode Island”, a business-led workforce development initiative to match partnerships to address industries’ workforce challenges, focusing on providing services to individuals unemployed or underemployed, minorities, veterans and people with disabilities.

This program links training directly to real employment opportunities across a wide range of industries. Since its inception, Real Jobs RI has:

- Formed 128 partnerships across 18 industry sectors
- Served over 36,000 Rhode Islanders
- Engaged more than 6,500 employers in a state with only 40,000 total employers

What sets this initiative apart is not just its scale, but its deliberate inclusion of individuals with disabilities, such as RIDDC’s Self-Employment initiative, Looking Upwards PCA training, Project SEARCH at Bally’s

through Access Point and “WorkAbility” through Skills for RI’s Future. Weldon emphasized a commitment to continuing to fund these projects that create genuine, life-changing opportunities for people with disabilities—even for a small number of participants—over large-scale but superficial outputs.

RIDDC’s Self-Employment Project: Opening Doors to Entrepreneurship

Sue Babin, from RIDDC, shared the success of the Self-Employment Project, funded through Real Jobs RI. This program empowers individuals with disabilities to launch their own businesses by offering:

- Eight small business start-up classes
- One-on-one coaching from former SBA and other professionals
- Mini-grants for startup costs
- Ongoing peer mentorship and marketing support

The benefits of this program go far beyond economic self-sufficiency. As shown in the story of Rachel Rasnick, a woman with autism and OCD, the journey to entrepreneurship built confidence, social engagement, and statewide recognition. Rachel went from hiding under a desk in her first class to running a successful art business, teaching others, and even having her work featured in holiday cards by the Governor and U.S. senators.

Project SEARCH: Inclusive Training Inside Bally’s Casino

Rory Carmody from Access Point RI, presented Rhode Island’s unique adaptation of Project SEARCH, tailored for adults aged 18–30 with limited or no previous work experience. Hosted inside Bally’s Twin River Casino, this initiative:

- Immersed participants in hands-on training across multiple departments
- Earned overwhelming support from staff and labor unions
- Resulted in 100% of participants receiving job offers upon graduation

What began as a small idea blossomed into a

relationship-based employment model, where business partners not only welcomed new talent, but actively advocated for more inclusion.

Inclusive PCA Training: Bridging Disability and Direct Care

Aimee Fernandes, from Looking Upwards, shared another success story: an inclusive Personal Care Assistant (PCA) training program. This 10-week initiative trains people with and without disabilities to support individuals with physical limitations. Many graduates go on to secure employment, care for family, or launch long-term careers in human services.

The program's impact is tangible. For example, John, a graduate with an intellectual disability, joined the PCA training to care for his roommate—making it possible for both of them to maintain independent living.

The Power of Partnership

This success story is rooted in intentional cross-agency collaboration. RIDDC, DLT, and Real Jobs RI worked alongside providers like AccessPoint RI and Looking Upwards to ensure sustainability. The takeaway? As Sue Babin put it plainly: “We all could not have done this incredible work without the support from the Department of Labor and Training.”

And as Doug Crandell reinforced:

“We don’t build inclusive communities with just programs—we build them with people, policies, and persistence.”

A Model Worth Replicating

Rhode Island may be the smallest state, but its employment innovation for people with disabilities is making an outsized impact. With inclusive entrepreneurship, integrated training programs, and robust public-private collaboration, Rhode Island offers a powerful model for other states looking to build equity into their workforce development systems.

As Georgia and other states continue to advance their own disability justice agendas, the blueprint laid out by

RIDDC, DLT, and Real Jobs RI is not only inspiring—it’s actionable.



Claudia and Matty at the Vendor Spotlight Event

Vendor Spotlight

RWB in Warwick hosted the first scheduled Vendor Spotlights, bringing together new small business owners from the RI Developmental Disabilities Council’s Self-Employment Project funded by the Department of Labor and Training (DLT) for an afternoon of connection, community, and business networking. The event not only provided small business owners an opportunity to showcase their products to RWB’s loyal customer base but also fostered interaction among the three new entrepreneurs themselves.

The event was organized by Claudia Lowe and Karyn Carfagna, staff of RI’s Self-Employment Project, and also family entrepreneurs themselves, to provide new business owners with the experience of setting up their own vendor booth with items for sale, distributing their business cards, and interacting with potential customers.

“This idea was developed specifically for the newbies from the last few business development series,” Claudia announced. “They had the opportunity to set up a vendor table, and see what they needed for a good presentation. We discussed the details of set-up, etc. with them before the event. Clearly, they all had put a

lot of thought into it, and they made a commitment. We'll do it again."

Karyn added that "this was a positive experience, with the benefits of using what they've learned in the business classes to promote and sell, to participate in events, and to interact with their peers. We were able to provide a platform, a comfortable setting for them.



Pen & Pedigree's Anne Gardner at her first vendor event

Anne Gardner, founder of Pen & Pedigree, is a genealogist, researcher, writer, and records management professional who specializes in uncovering lost family histories. Whether it's confirming family legends or locating ancestral homes, Anne helps her clients discover their roots. Her work often bridges DNA results with original documents to craft compelling family narratives.

Anne noted that she was glad to meet Karyn, Claudia, and others in person. Having attended other networking events, she mentioned this was her first vendor table display.

Matty Krosschell, the creative force behind Snappy Cat Creations, presented a vibrant display of photography, cards, and artwork - many centered around fractal designs (repeating geometric patterns). Inspired by the naturally occurring patterns found in nature - like

the veins of a leaf - Matty also experiments with fluid dynamics and chemical reactions to produce colorful, one-of-a-kind prints.

Matty's mother, Karen said, "I really loved the place, the space, and the concept. It was an extremely welcoming, comfortable environment to be in. The social part was so nice even if the traffic wasn't high (the day before Easter). We made a few sales. Also, the marketing feedback was really helpful - Matty will now focus on the fractal work - the unusual creations, like bearded moss, and the underside of mushrooms photographed."

Kimberlee "Kimmie" Mallett, founder of Kimmy's Creations & More, showcased her dual talents as an artist and author. Along with her collection of small books, her book *Color Me Beautiful* tackles personal and social challenges while empowering children with messages of hope and self-advocacy, with a part two, in the works. Kimmie enhances her storytelling through paintings of her book's characters, such as *Sleeping Panda*, among other subjects. Her works are inspired by her father's artistic legacy.

"This initial event is part of our ongoing efforts to connect new entrepreneurs with established community businesses or Vendor Shows and provide them with more opportunities to sell their products or services to new customers and grow their businesses," said Sue Babin, Project Director, RI's Self-Employment Project administered by the RI Developmental Disability Council (RIDDC) and funded by the Department of Labor and Training's "Real Jobs RI" initiative. "We know that everyone benefits from opportunities to support small businesses and help local economies."

Longtime Red White & Brew customer Karen Rasnick stopped by with her daughter, local artist Rachel Rasnick, to explore the latest offerings at the adjoining retail space, *The Budding Violet*. The shop features an ever-changing selection of handmade items created by entrepreneurs from RIDDC's self-employment project and beyond. "We come in every few weeks to see what's new," Karen shared. "It's always exciting to discover fresh talent and feel the creative energy at Red, White & Brew."

With more Vendor Spotlights on the horizon, the program promises to keep building bridges between local businesses, customers from the general public and the vibrant community of entrepreneurs with disabilities.

Vendor Contact Information

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Uncover the Threads of Your Heritage with Pen and Pedigree Genealogy Services

When Anne Gardner first traced her lineage back to the Mayflower and uncovered a powerful ancestral tie to the Narragansett people, she realized something profound: our identities are intricately woven into the stories of those who came before us. What began as a personal journey through generations quickly became a calling. And from that passion, Pen and Pedigree Genealogy Services was born.

Anne wasn't always a genealogist. She built a career in corporate America - structured, fast-paced, and far from the handwritten letters, dusty archives, and DNA matches that now fill her days. But life has a way of redirecting us. After facing personal hardship and tragedy, she found solace in rediscovering her roots. This healing process led her to Boston University, where she completed a rigorous certificate program in genealogical research, transforming her passion into a profession.

Logically, people mention to Anne the very familiar online DNA testing services. "Yes, sometimes people begin there, and they bring results to me," notes Anne. There are differences between the services and Anne tracks down the original documents whenever possible. As she discusses the paths of a few clients, she acknowledges that there are times people learn that they've visited someone else's grandparent. It's all part of the process.

Today, Anne offers more than a service - she offers a journey. Whether you're seeking to trace a mysterious

family line, understand your genetic heritage through DNA analysis, or preserve the rich oral histories of your elders before they fade, Pen and Pedigree is your trusted guide. Clients receive meticulously prepared reports, complete with analyzed documents, insights, and personalized guidance. Anne also offers one-on-one coaching to help budding researchers take their first steps or break through brick walls in their family trees.



Kimmie Mallett makes her story's characters come alive

Finding Voice Through Color and Story: Kimmie's Artistic Journey Shines at First Vendor Spotlight

At the first Vendor Spotlight hosted at Red White and Brew, Kimmie Mallett's work quietly commanded attention. Nestled in the corner of the café was Kimmie, a local artist and author, surrounded by a display of her vivid paintings and self-published books—each piece telling a story more layered than the one before it.

Kimmie's creative voice is unique not only in what she produces, but in how she shares it. Her storytelling often begins with pencil sketches, which she worked on during the event, showing raw expressions of emotion and perspective that later evolve into complete works - both written and painted. At the heart of many of her stories is Bella, a character who reflects Kimmie's own experience navigating the world as a person with autism. Bella's journey explores challenges with



RWB owner Michael Coyne is with Kimmie Mallett, and he's happy to celebrate his friends' businesses

communication, acceptance, and resilience, giving readers a candid look into emotional realities that often go unheard.

In her newest project, Kimmie takes a bold narrative turn. The second installment of her Color Me Beautiful series shifts perspective to Bella's former bully—now exploring growth, accountability, and transformation. "Every character has their version of what happened," Kimmie explained. "In the second book, the bully becomes the main character. She's starting to understand the impact of her actions." It's a powerful lens, emphasizing empathy and character development in ways that challenge stereotypes and invite meaningful reflection.

While her storytelling is impressive, Kimmie's artistic expression goes beyond the page. Her acrylic paintings are often infused with unexpected mediums—mirror paints, fabric paints, and glow-in-the-dark elements that reveal hidden layers when the lights go down. "Some of them glow, but you need the right lighting," she said. "I'm thinking of putting a note on the ones that do, so people can ask about it."

At Red White and Brew, her artwork was more than decoration; it was conversation. A moonlit ocean scene, for example, was inspired by her late father, who painted nighttime landscapes when she was a child. "His favorite scenes were at night," Kimmie recalled. "He inspired me to paint and write. He always said, 'You don't need to be perfect—just create what's

in your heart.'" In one painting—a companion piece to her book *Memories: A Mermaid's Journey Through Grief*—a nine-tentacled octopus (affectionately dubbed "Lacto") represents strength in difference. The mermaid in the story befriends Lacto, who proudly embraces his uniqueness. "He says, 'Why would someone bully such a great octopus like you?' That's the point," Kimmie said, smiling.

Kimmie's participation in the Red White and Brew event marked a significant milestone. "This has been one of the first successful shows I've done," she said. "Being in a good environment with people who support me—it means a lot. I don't always have that at home, so being here helps me feel seen."

With the help of Michael Coyne, of Red White & Brew and a fellow business owner who assisted her in setting up, and the encouragement of community members stopping to chat, Kimmie not only showcased her talent—she owned her voice. Each book and painting on display became an invitation to connect. Not mass-produced, not rushed—just honest, hand-crafted stories born of personal experience and imagination.

As her series continues and her artistry evolves, one thing remains certain: Kimmie is more than an artist. She's a storyteller, an advocate, and a reflection of what can happen when creative expression meets community support.

Fractals, Focus, and Finding Peace: The Artistry of Snappy Cat Creations

In a world often defined by noise and haste, Matty Krossschell offers a refreshingly intricate lens through which to experience stillness. As the creative force behind Snappy Cat Creations, Matty has built a small business rooted in wonder - where abstract beauty meets mathematical precision, and every piece tells a deeper story.

Matty's work is unmistakable. Vivid, geometric, and layered with intention, Matty's designs often emerge from a lifelong fascination with the patterns found in both nature and mathematics. A neurodivergent individual, Matty has always seen the world a little differently - and beautifully. Since childhood," as Matty

shares, “my passion has been examining the natural and mathematical worlds. I bring this unique focus on patterns and details to everything I create.” Matty also photographs wildlife, landscapes, close-ups, flowers, and more.

The pieces are more than decorative - they are meditative. Each design is an invitation to pause and look closer. From glowing fractal bursts that evoke the cosmos to fluid arrangements reminiscent of a Mandelbrot set in motion, the art channels both chaos and calm with precision. The work, as Matty describes it, is not only a creative outlet but also a tool for self-regulation and peace. “Creating helps me find balance. It’s calming. And my hope is that my art can offer that same peace and sunshine to others.”

The collection, offered as matted prints and note cards, has become a popular source of both personal enjoyment and thoughtful gifting. Whether it’s a small piece to brighten up a work desk or a bold centerpiece that sparks conversation, Snappy Cat Creations resonates with those who seek meaningful design.

Beyond the art itself, Matty’s approach to business reflects a deep commitment to authenticity and accessibility. The work and updates are shared through the Facebook page, as well as at the recent vendor spotlight at Red White & Brew. The artist is always open to connecting with curious minds via email. In a space that can sometimes feel overly commercialized, Snappy Cat Creations stands out as a passion-driven endeavor, powered by personal insight and a love for beauty found in unlikely places.

It was at the vendor spotlight event that the fractal work began to take the spotlight as a unique approach to art. At the same time, it is the “unique selling proposition” to be used in future marketing efforts, including Snappy Cat Creations table displays at future shows.

As an example, the swirling piece titled Dante’s Inferno, is particularly striking, blending fiery tones with fractal textures that feel both ancient and futuristic. It’s a stunning example of how Matty uses mathematical forms not only for their visual appeal but



Matty Krossschell at the vendor event

also to provoke emotion and introspection. Each piece has layers—both literal and metaphorical—and Matty encourages viewers to bring their own interpretations.

Whether you’re drawn to the art by the science behind it, the serenity it offers, or simply the aesthetic brilliance, Matty’s work has a way of lingering in your mind long after you’ve seen it. According to Matty, “We live in an infinite reality—and there is beauty in that if you know where to look.”

For anyone seeking something a little different, a little deeper, and a lot more inspired, Snappy Cat Creations is worth a closer look.

Connect with Matty Krossschell and explore the collection:

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