



## **CHANGING OUR EMPLOYMENT MINDSET**

### **Raising Our Expectations**

#### **Joseph LeBlanc, High Hopes Clubhouse, Maine**

Hello, My name is Joe LeBlanc, I have been asked to speak on my experiences of going to work and making a living free from the restrictions of benefits. I have both a major mental illness and alcohol dependency. For years I was unemployable. I was dependent on Social Security and my life was at a point where I just existed. I lived month to month, struggling with my issues and really saw no way out. No way that my life was ever going to be better.

From the time I can remember, alcohol was part of my family life. I was brought up in a dysfunctional home where nightly parties were normal. Violence was a regular occurrence and all of the adults in my life abused substances. As a result, I started substance abusing when I was 15 years old. At 16 years old dropped out of school working part time jobs on and off, but continuing to substance abuse. Alcohol abuse is how I fit in to the world as I knew it. I now know my childhood was very dysfunctional and it impacted me greatly.

Through my 20's I continued to have moments of success in jobs, but ultimately drugs and drinking again interfered with my life. I finally ended up in a rehab center and while there was diagnosed with major depression. I struggled with my sobriety and found life difficult; I still did not fit in with the society of recovering alcoholics that now I was part of. I was lost emotionally, I lost relationships, I lost jobs, I just could not deal with my life. During these years, I had suicidal thoughts; I cut myself and I hated myself. And yes after three years of sobriety I started drinking again. In 1995 I was finally admitted for the first time to a psychiatric hospital. Again I was diagnosed with chronic major depression and chronic alcoholism; I spent the next 10 years of my life living on Social Security.

Of course managing my mental illness was a constant struggle, and I began to experience intense panic attacks. I was seeing a therapist and going to medication clinic. I was assigned a case manager and my life was now being a client, a patient and a dependent on the system. I tried working part time jobs from time to time and eventually used up my 9 month trial work period. At one time I found a decent job and found that by working part time and collecting Social Security I was making a decent living. Sounds great right! I will address that subject in a few minutes.

In 2002, I found Clubhouse thanks to my new case manager suggesting I give this Clubhouse thing a try. High Hopes Clubhouse was very small, nothing like it is today, but there was a community of people there that welcomed me. I knew they had some type of employment opportunities called transitional employment, but really I was just looking for a place to belong. I did well for a while; High Hopes Clubhouse gave me something constructive and positive to do. But as usual I would start struggling with my symptoms, which would lead to drinking and drugging and I would stop attending the Clubhouse. I had some run ins with the law, struggled with relationships in my family and my social circle consisted of drunks and drug dealers. The time frame from 2003 to 2007 was kind of a blur and very hard to remember as I was taking some pretty strong anti-psychotics and of course drinking on a regular basis. On the brief time frames I was sober

I would still attend Clubhouse. High Hopes always welcomed me and encouraged me to keep attending. It was during this time frame that I was finally diagnosed with bi- polar disorder.

In 2007, I made a commitment to myself, to really join the Clubhouse and attend on a regular basis. I was offered a Transitional Employment Opportunity. I worked this job for 9 months and successfully completed the site. Sure, I would have a slip every once in a while, but kept going to AA meetings, kept going to the Clubhouse and starting adding some exercise to my routine. With all these things, along with finally finding the right medications for my illness, I was able to start my road to real sobriety and to real employment. For the first time in many years my head was clear. I felt like there was an improvement in my quality of life for the first time. In 2008, I asked High Hopes staff about another work opportunity. As always the Clubhouse staff was behind the idea 100 % and I soon started a new placement in the receiving department of large retail store. I bought a car, I had a great apartment, and I felt good about my life, but knew I could only maintain it by working.

I was hired in a permanent position in the company that started out as a TE site, life was good. I wanted to work, I loved my job, and I knew that at times, I worked more hours than Social Security would allow. I had heard stories of people who had worked too much and had to repay Social Security. I thought of all the jobs I had worked over the years while on Social Security and the Clubhouse had encouraged me to report my earnings of my current job, but really, I thought this was not a big deal. I had some concern and thought I should check out what my status was with Social Security.

I shared my concerns with Jim Schmidt. Jim was a former Director of Fountain House in New York City, and he retired in Maine where High Hopes Clubhouse is. He was on our Advisory Board and was a very strong advocate for members to get full-time jobs. He turned out to be a very big part of my transition from being dependent on Social Security to being dependent on MYSELF. He introduced me to a disability lawyer who worked to assure that my Medicare would take care of my medications even if I worked full time. After all I was finally stable and wanted to remain that way!

It was time to make a decision. I could be done work and live off the system in poverty or I could make the jump to full time work and be responsible for my own future. I decided to work full time! I was scared to death. Jim would call me most mornings before work, to encourage me and tell me things were going to work out. His support and the support of the Clubhouse got me through the first few weeks, until I started making it on my own. I started living a life like everyone else. I was really doing it! I did find that I had to move to a cheaper apartment, imagine having to go from a great apartment while on benefits to a cheaper apartment off benefits! This seemed like a slap in the face, but it was ok. I felt good paying my own way.

Then the real slap in the face came! I have to admit this is when I almost gave up for good. Remember earlier I said I would get back to how good the money was on benefits and working part time? Well with my years of substance abuse, and dealing with a major mental illness it seems that following the rules was not my first priority. I got a bill from Social Security saying I owed them \$47,000. I knew I may have had some overpayment, but \$47,000!

Jim and I worked with Social Security to figure out a solution. Jim kept telling me think of it as like a large medical bill. I held on to my sanity just barely! The Clubhouse and especially Jim kept me going forward; in the end we worked out a deal that I pay Social Security \$30 a month, likely for the rest of my life. But I still don't have to count on them for my survival and I am independent from the system.

I had worked so hard to become independent from the system. I had worked so hard to have a full time job. I have worked so hard to remain sober. I have worked hard to have a life. I really am living the best I ever have.

I tell this story to encourage others that independence from the system can be possible. Clubhouse gave me a place where I was wanted and needed, and yes even expected. It gave me a community where I felt I belonged. It gave me a place that I was always welcomed. It gave meaning to my day and as a result I could grow in other areas including sobriety. Here is my advice to you all: Keep the connection with Clubhouse, try different work experiences, get wellness into your routine, and consider a life off benefits and free from the system, and welcome the support of others as you grow. And always report your earnings!

Thank you for listening to my story.