

Luke came into the centre looking for help in finding an employment opportunity. Luke's dream was to become an executive chef and build a career in this industry. For four years Luke faced rejection and discrimination. He is a marginalized individual facing various barriers as he is a youth in a rural community. In addition to this, Luke is missing one arm from the elbow down. Throughout his life, he has been judged on this physical aspect and had become used to being discriminated against. During his job search experiences, once his physical disability was brought forward, there was automatic doubt placed on his abilities to perform job duties. In our first interactions with Luke, it was apparent that he had great passion and motivation, as well as excellent intuitiveness and insight.

Just from conversing with Luke, we knew he would be a great asset to any team and would thrive in the right environment. At the time that Luke came in, there was an open cook's position at a local restaurant. When we presented the opportunity to him, he was excited and also apprehensive due to his past experiences with being rejected by employers. He had little hope that this employer would be willing to give him a chance to fulfil his dream of cooking. Although Luke had no previous experience cooking in a professional setting, we were confident that he was qualified for this job based on the fact that they were willing and open to train the right candidate.

We connected with the employer to propose Luke as a candidate based on the fact that he possessed everything that she needed and wanted in an employee. We wanted to bring to the employer's attention that Luke had one arm so that she would be prepared when meeting him. Initially she was skeptical and seemed unsure of the unknown. She immediately had questions and reservations surrounding his abilities and capabilities in regards to this position. We assured her that Luke was qualified according to her requirements. His superior ability to adapt to various situations and environments allowed him to perform the tasks required of him. We facilitated a meeting between the employer and the candidate in order to address any of her questions and concerns around his abilities to perform the job duties. We were confident that Luke would be able to demonstrate and articulate his talents in a way that would allow her to see past his physical barrier. The employer gave Luke a tour of the kitchen and he was able to demonstrate alternative methods of conducting various tasks. The employer was amazed at his creativity and ambition. There was not a problem that Luke would not find the solution to. Luke impressed the employer so much during the meeting that was facilitated by the employer liaison that she was willing to hire Luke on the spot. After leaving the meeting, Luke was overwhelmed with emotion.

We felt the next step towards employment would be to coordinate a work trial for both the employer and candidate to determine if this would be the right fit for Luke. With that in place, it was determined that we could follow up with both parties. We were not prepared for the feedback that was given to us around the work trial experience. The employer was flabbergasted with Luke's performance. In fact, she could not wrap her head around how quickly he was able to adapt and learn his way around the kitchen. He won over the hearts of her and the staff that he worked with. The employer said that Luke was "...better than some people that I've seen who do not have a disability". They offered Luke a position after his first day in the work trial.

When following up with Luke regarding the work trial, he spoke with a new sense of confidence and was thrilled with how he was received. His opportunity to live his dream was finally successful. The job was everything and more than what he had hoped for. He gained a renewed sense of purpose. He had very high hopes for this opportunity.

Luke was offered the cook's position at the restaurant through a YEF placement. In our subsequent follow ups with the employer, we have learned that Luke has become a major asset to her business and her team. He has exceeded all expectations and is changing their lives in a positive manner. The kitchen manager commented on Luke's ability to create dinner and dessert specials based on his own recipes, which are well received from staff and patrons. Luke is able to quickly learn tasks and carry them out with ease. He is able to close the kitchen independently, which was an initial concern before the employer met him. Luke has impacted his work environment with his easy-going and friendly personality. The kitchen manager and owner state that every day they "...watch him in amazement".

When we contacted Luke to come into our office to sign the required paperwork for his YEF placement, we witnessed a different Luke walking through our door. He wore upon his face a radiant smile that was hard for anyone to miss. His new attire reflected his new attitude. There was an evident strut in his step that displayed confidence.

In attempts to contact Luke to ensure things were going well for him, our employer liaison had the opportunity to speak to his mother. She expressed her deep, heartfelt gratitude around the change in her son's and their family's lives. She stated that her son "...had blossomed as a person" and that his sense of confidence was at the highest she had ever seen. She shared that Luke had started to become depressed due to the constant rejection that he had previously faced. Now he was experiencing acceptance and appreciation beyond his wildest dreams. She shared that Northern Lights had given their family the "...best Christmas present". She said that she could never express how much this meant to her and her family. Luke had changed so much as a direct result from this employment opportunity. He had pride, joy, and purpose. He was a different man at home. Luke's mother expressed her thoughts to us with tears of happiness.

Luke continues to grow as a cook and as an individual every day. He has promised to give Northern Lights Canada a shout out when he wins Top Chef Canada.

*Written by Sarah Ballenthin, Employer Liaison in Mount Forest*

