

The College-to-Work Story of a Young Woman with a Disability – Vicky Queyquep

Recorded June 2020 [Listen to it here.](#)

- VICKY QUEYQUEP: 00:10 [music] There'll be a lot of highs. There'll be a lot of lows. But in those times where you're stuck and you don't know what to do, just keep on moving and just keep pulling through.
- NICKY MILLER: 00:21 Hi, Vicky. Thanks for joining us today. Welcome to our podcast.
- QUEYQUEP: 00:25 Thank you for having me.
- MILLER: 00:27 We wanted to chat with you a little bit about your college-to-work experience. Kessler recently launched a survey, the 2020 Kessler Foundation Employment and Disability Survey: Recent College Graduates. The survey dispelled many long-held myths about people with disabilities in higher education. It revealed that 90% of people with disabilities are often employed. And we wanted to hear your story and how it relates to our findings from the survey. I wanted to start off by giving you the opportunity to share a little bit about yourself, what you do at Kessler Foundation, and a little bit about your disability.
- QUEYQUEP: 01:03 So what I do is I collaborate with my colleagues at the foundation as well as with external partners that we have, and I create multimedia strategies to try to reach donors as well as potential donors of the foundation. This could be through creating web content or print materials as well as planning special events. Biggest event that we have at Kessler Foundation every year is Stroll 'N Roll. So I along with members of the development team, we play a huge role in the behind-the-scenes planning of this fundraiser. It's been a great turnout every year, so that's something that I really enjoy. And I've been at Kessler Foundation for two years now. I started out as a development assistant and have now moved my way up as a donor engagement specialist. And I've truly loved every step of the way of this process, and every day is different. Every day there is always something that I'm trying to spew up in my brain and try to think of something creative to do.
- QUEYQUEP: 02:14 A little bit about my own disability, I have an L2 spinal cord injury. When I was born, I was diagnosed with having a tethered spinal cord, which basically means that my spinal cord was unable to basically move freely inside of my spinal column. So it was causing my spinal cord to stretch out. So I had to have surgery about a month into the time that I was born to correct this. And from then on, I pretty much had a pretty regular childhood where I could walk and run and do anything that an able-bodied kid would be able to do. However, when I turned 8 years old, my spine started retethering, and I started developing a really severe scoliosis. I had spine surgery. All continued to be well until I was about 13, and my orthopedist discovered that my spinal cord was retethering again. So in October of 2008, I had spine surgery. A lot of the major nerves in my spine were affected, so I became a paraplegic after surgery. It's been 11 years now since surgery. I then lost movement and sensation in my lower limbs, and I am now wheelchair bound. In 11 years, I have learned to navigate through a wheelchair. It has its ups and downs, but pretty much got it all together.

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- MILLER: 03:44 Our survey revealed that most students with disabilities overcome different barriers preventing them from working, whether it's discrimination or it's transportation. How does the survey relate to your life in any way?
- QUEYQUEP: 03:57 I've experienced my own personal barriers, especially with job hunting after graduation. So I graduated from Montclair State University in 2017 with a degree in Religious Studies, and I had thought that I was going to go into ministry to serve the Catholic Church. But I decided to go towards the nonprofit path instead because I had interned with the Christopher & Dana Reeve Foundation the spring of my senior year. I really enjoyed that experience so much that I wanted to pursue nonprofit as a possible career path. But it did take me a year to find jobs, and some of the issues that I kept coming across were a lack of experience. A lot of the entry-level jobs that I was looking for, they expected that you had four to five years of experience in that field, sometimes even more. So being a fresh college graduate, I thought, "How can that be?" That was one major issue that I had. I can definitely say it was frustrating because in that year I was trying to look for work, my closest friends had started to find jobs and were really starting to get their postgraduate life together. And here I was sitting at home, scrolling through the computer for hours at a time every day, and I couldn't find anything. So it was discouraging and frustrating during those times.
- QUEYQUEP: 05:26 And in college when I also tried looking for work, just something to balance during the summers or anything, I also tried to find retail jobs. And for a couple of the jobs that I applied for and was asked to come in for an interview, I still remember this one instance where when I arrived at the interview, I was denied the interview because they saw that I was in a wheelchair. And that broke my heart. To this day, it still upsets me that just because this-- sometimes employers, they see that this person has a physical disability, they don't want to hire you, and they don't want to see your potential. They only see what's on the outside. They don't really see beyond that.
- MILLER: 06:22 Vicky, how did you find it in yourself to keep pushing forward after dealing with something like that?
- QUEYQUEP: 06:27 Definitely a lot of faith - faith plays a huge role in my life - and a lot of talking to friends and family. And they were all really encouraging and telling me that just because this one employer said no doesn't mean that the rest of them are all going to say no to you. Of course, they were just as upset as I was that this particular employer had said no before even going forward with the interview. So it took some time for me to mentally push through, and I said, "You know what? I'm not going to let this take over the rest of my job hunt. I'm sure I have plenty of opportunities out there, so I'm just going to-- I'll let it go, and I'm just going to keep going and keep moving."
- MILLER: 07:16 It seems like you had a really good support system. You kept pushing through, filling out those applications until you eventually got hired.
- QUEYQUEP: 07:24 Yes. It was a lot of tweaking my résumé, changing up the cover letter, and submitting it, crossing my fingers that hopefully somebody would get back to me. So there were times where I just felt really stuck.
- MILLER: 07:38 We've talked about how much you loved college. And I had asked you previously, "Do you ever regret going to college?" And you said, "Absolutely not." Could you tell us a little bit about your college experience and what was that like?

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- QUEYQUEP: 07:52 I absolutely loved my time in college. I lived on campus my freshman through junior year. The first two years, I lived in a dorm on my own. And what I loved about this dorm was that it was 100% accessible. And I especially have to thank the Disability Resource Center at Montclair State because that center really prepared me for my next four years in college, whether it be with any tuition questions that I had, what preparation I needed to do with housing on campus, and they wanted to know what accommodations I needed to make my college experience as great as it could possibly be. So even the door going into my dorm room, they even modified it so that it would have an automatic button for me to open. And in order to unlock the door, all I had to do was just scan my card. And I thought that was awesome they went above and beyond to do that. And they also took my class schedule and gave it to the shuttle service at Montclair State. That way, the shuttle could come and pick me up right outside of my dorm room every day at whatever time my classes were. And I didn't have to worry so much about wheeling around campus, getting tired, having to take an extra long break, and then end up being late for class. No. Because of the shuttle service, I was able to make it on time, and they would be there when I was ready to get picked up and bring me back. So that was wonderful.
- QUEYQUEP: 09:37 And then my junior year of college, I decided that I wanted to live in the apartments on campus because they had a kitchen and it had a living room and you could have up to three or four roommates. And I was able to check out the handicapped accessible apartment before deciding that that's where I wanted to live my junior year. And I have to say it was perfect. The counters were lower. That way, I wouldn't have to have so much strain trying to reach over the stove when I wanted to cook. The bathroom was huge, so I had plenty of room to move around. It had a roll-in shower which was perfect. My room was also very spacious. And I was able to pull in two other girls, two friends of mine from college, and we were all able to have our own bedrooms. And then there was an additional bathroom for them to use. That way, I could use my own for my own privacy. And we shared the kitchen, and it was great. That part of my time in college allowed me to boost my independence. So in college, I had to teach myself skills like how am I going to do laundry on my own using what the university provided, and then how to prepare my own meals, and kind of just work on my own schedule as a student and try to get myself organized.
- MILLER: 11:10 It sounds like you really took advantage of your college experience, whether it was networking or creating friendships or a sense of independence. You really had a well-rounded college experience.
- QUEYQUEP: 11:22 Yes, absolutely.
- MILLER: 11:24 I want to talk a little bit more about how these programs helped with your future employment opportunities.
- QUEYQUEP: 11:29 Yes. The Career Services within the College of Humanities and Social Sciences, which is the department that my major, Religious Studies, is under, I really utilized their services when I was preparing for my Reeve Foundation internship. There were a lot of things that were highlighted on it that were suggested that I change to make it more appealing to whoever it was that I was applying to. I took those critiques, and I made my changes, and it worked out, which is great. Even in that time after college when I was still struggling to find a job, I would run into certain faculty that I had met

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when I was an undergrad, and they would ask me, like, "Oh, what are doing for work?" And I said, "Actually, I'm still having a hard time." They were offering to help me. They said, "Send your résumé. Let's connect on LinkedIn, and let me help you." I thought that was great. I highly recommend that whichever university that you choose to go to, utilize their career services because these people are willing to help you move forward. To this day, I'm super thankful for that.

- MILLER: 12:45 What would you say to someone with a disability seeking higher education who's probably a bit nervous or has been discriminated and maybe having second thoughts about attending college?
- QUEYQUEP: 12:56 Don't be afraid. I know college sounds like an intimidating time, especially compared to high school. Definitely use the resources that are there, especially the Disability Resource Center. Not only are they there to help make accommodations for you when you're on campus, but any kind of problems that you're encountering, there's always people there to talk to. And get involved on campus. You're surrounded by so many other freshmen who are probably in the same shoes as you are, and they're trying to just navigate this new chapter in their lives. So just don't be afraid to say hi and be kind and just put yourself out there.
- MILLER: 13:35 What do you have to say to employers who are unsure about hiring someone with a disability?
- QUEYQUEP: 13:41 Get to know this person on the inside. Give them a chance to show you what they're capable of. Be more compassionate. Be more understanding of the conditions that people like us are in instead of just denying people as soon as you physically see them, because it hurts. It hurts a lot more than it should. And once I find a job that I am truly invested in and that I'm passionate about, I'm going to stick with it because it's not easy for people like me with a disability to job hunt.
- MILLER: 14:17 What advice would you give to your younger self, considering everything that you've been through?
- QUEYQUEP: 14:22 There's going to be a lot of unexpected curveballs that'll come through. There'll be a lot of highs. There'll be a lot of lows. But in those times where you're stuck and you don't know what to do, just keep on moving and just keep pulling through because there is so much-- you're greater than what you think you're capable of. [music]
- MILLER: 14:43 Vicky, thank you so much for joining us today and for sharing your story.
- QUEYQUEP: 14:47 Thank you for having me.
- MILLER: 14:48 For anyone who's interested in learning about the survey and watching the latest webinar that reveals findings from our survey, go check out our website at KesslerFoundation.org/KFSurvey2020.
- ANNOUNCER: 15:01 Tuned into our podcast series lately? Join our listeners in 90 countries who enjoy learning about the work of Kessler Foundation. Listen on iTunes, SoundCloud, Spotify, or wherever you get your podcasts. This podcast was recorded and was edited and produced by Joan Banks-Smith, Creative Producer for Kessler Foundation. Like us on Facebook, follow us on Instagram, listen to us on SoundCloud, and tweet with us on Twitter.