

Jason's story

Jason Mann has a learning disability and works as an assistant zookeeper at Twycross Zoo. He recently won an employee award for customer service. After winning he had lots of interviews with newspapers and radio shows and has become a local celebrity.

Five years before winning the award Jason was not able to leave the house or travel on his own. After losing contact with his friends from school and college Jason spent a lot of time on his own. He had tried several work placements in the past but none of them had been right for him. His family did not think it was a good idea for Jason to try work experience again.

Rob Kerr from Warwickshire Employment Support Team (WEST) first met Jason in 2005. His parents told Rob they knew it would be better for Jason if he could find paid work and travel on his own, but they had been unlucky with support schemes before and felt let down.

Rob visited Jason a number of times over six weeks until Jason agreed to visit the WEST office. Jason told Rob he would like to join WEST's gardening group. Through the group Jason met people he had been to school and college with. Working with old friends gave him confidence.

Rob found Jason a work placement at an animal sanctuary in Jason's local town. Jason worked hard and learnt quickly. After a few weeks the manager was happy to leave Jason to work on his own.

Jason's family were still taking him to and from work, so WEST suggested Jason take a travel-training course. At first Jason's mother was worried because he did not know very much about road safety, but Jason was keen to try the course. After two sessions Jason decided that he no longer needed help to travel. He now travels everywhere on his own.

WEST raised the idea of Jason finding paid work but his parents worried Jason's benefits would be affected. Rob explained that most people are better off when they are working than when they are on benefits. He explained that if Jason found paid work his incapacity benefit would be replaced with the Working Person's Tax Credit with the Disability Premium. His Disability Living Allowance would stay the same because it would not be seen as an extra income. Rob told Jason and his parents that if Jason found paid work WEST would make sure Jason was given a full benefit check from the Disability Employment Advisor at his local Job Centre.

The animal sanctuary gave Jason a very good reference and WEST were able to find him a second work placement at Twycross Zoo. The placement lasted for six months and went so well the zoo manager decided to talk to WEST about offering Jason paid work. Jason's learning disability meant he was not able to do some of the jobs that Zookeepers need to do, so Twycross Zoo created the role of Assistant Zookeeper for Jason. He now works at the zoo two days a week with a team of five zookeepers and is paid the National Minimum Wage.

Thanks to Jason's hard work and the staff at Twycross Zoo he has done really well in his role and grown in confidence.

In Autumn 2009 Jason won Twycross Zoo's CUTE award. The CUTE award is given to staff members who have worked hard to 'Create a **U**nique **T**wycross **E**xperience'. Jason won the award for making sure a teenage visitor who used a wheelchair did not miss out on petting the animals in the paddock. Jason brought out each of the animals in the paddock and took them up close to the teenage visitor.

When Jason won the award the Pets at Twycross Manager Andy Moore said, 'we could not manage without him. It is a pleasure to recognise his efforts.'

Since winning the award Jason has given a number of newspaper and radio interviews to talk about his job and his learning disability. His parents are very proud of him and pleased that he has become more confident and independent.

This is what Jason had to say about his job as Assistant Zookeeper, 'I enjoy my job at Twycross. It has brought me out of my shell. I talk and I have a bit of banter with everyone at work.'

This is what Rob Kerr of WEST had to say about Jason, 'Jason has shown that a learning disability does not mean only entry-level jobs are available. He has also proven that professionals should not dismiss an individual's desire to pursue a certain career path, even if that career path does seem unobtainable.'