

My name is Janelle Hewitt and I am 19 years old and I live in Danby, about 22 miles south of Rutland. I am one of eight children in my family. My father is on disability and my mother has never worked – aside from taking care of eight children. Neither my mother or my father graduated from High School. And, none of my six older brothers or sisters graduated.

When I was 16 and a sophomore in high school, I was seriously thinking of dropping out. I wanted a diploma, but school was brutal for me. I had a significant birthmark on my face and other students bullied me. I got into a lot of fights. Teachers didn't like that.

Luckily, I met Lynn Bondurant from VAL's Three Step Forward Program. I told her that I was thinking of dropping out and she introduced me to the folks at VAL in Rutland. Working with my school, Mill River, we negotiated a plan. If I would stay in classes for one more year, I could also study at VAL and I could graduate a year early.

I agreed to the plan. One year, just one more year and I would be out of there with a diploma. I had a really, really, busy junior year. I attended classes at Mill River during the school day and studied at VAL in the afternoon. I often worked on assignments until 9:00 at night. I couldn't have done it without VAL and Three Steps Forward. Janet at VAL kept me on track to be sure I was meeting all my requirements and she found creative ways for me to get credit. Lynn at Three Steps gave me rides and helped me study.

And I did it. I fulfilled all my graduation requirements. I wasn't going to attend the Mill River graduation but Janet at VAL and Lynn talked me into it. When I showed up in a cap and gown the seniors asked their teacher why I was graduating with them. They were told how I did two years in one and they knew that none of my older brothers or sisters had graduated. When I walked across the stage those seniors gave me a standing ovation.

My story could have ended here. First in my family to graduate, yes, but with no specific skills, no good job options. Likely minimum wage at some meaningless job. But VAL hooked me up with the Step It Up Program and I enrolled in LNA classes at Stafford Technical Center. VSAC paid for my tuition, Voc Rehab paid for my books and supplies, and Step It Up made sure I could get to and from classes, had access to WIFI for online courses, and helped whenever I needed it. Even if it meant picking me up at 9:00 p.m. after taking a CPR class or getting me to state testing in Middlebury at 8:00 in the morning. You have to understand that there was no way for my parents to do these things and no bus or other options.

So, I completed my LNA coursework in June and then had to take and pass the LNA state license exam. This was scary. I had to go someplace I had never been, with people I had never met, take a written test and then take a practical test. I had never had a practical test. I was very nervous. I passed the written test with no problem but because I was so nervous I forgot some steps on my practical exam. I was mad at myself but nobody lost faith in me. Step It Up paid for me to try again and I passed the second time.

Now I was ready to start interviewing but, well, I disappeared. Lynn tracked me down. I admitted that I was scared. If I was going to work, I had to deal with the public. And all my life I had felt disrespected by others because of my birthmark. I didn't see how I could get along with people at work any better than I had at school. I talked with Lynn about it and she talked with all the folks who knew me at VAL. All my life when I had mentioned my birthmark as a problem people offered me counseling. They weren't listening to me. I wanted it removed. This time my support team listened to me. We made an appointment to find out how much it would cost to remove. And, when I used the language and negotiating skills I had learned from VAL, Three Steps and Step It Up, the doctors agreed to research it further and they found a way for the cost to be covered by Medicaid.

So, now with connections provided by Step It Up, I got an interview at Rutland Regional Medical Center. They told me that I could make \$15.45 an hour and have paid vacation. They gave me a tour of the fifth-floor Oncology unit. A week or so later they contacted me and offered me a job. But, I hesitated. I had seen digital equipment at the hospital that I didn't know how to use. What if I couldn't do the job and I let people down? I was thinking that I wasn't ready for so much responsibility and I was going to take a job for minimum wage at a local nursing home instead. Lynn from Step It Up found out and arranged a meeting with the HR director at the hospital. I explained why I didn't think I could do the job and the HR person, Fran, told me that they would train me on the equipment and team me up with a precept so I wouldn't work alone until I was ready. I took the job.

I love my work. I really like being part of a team. I like helping people. The nurses on my floor have encouraged me to go to nursing school for my RN. And I want to, because I think I will be a very good nurse. I like helping people and I like responsibility. I plan to start classes at CCV this summer. One of the benefits of working at the hospital is that they will reimburse me for college courses.

So, VAL didn't just help me get a diploma. That was a critical step, but it was just the first step. They helped me connect with further training and continued to encourage me. I often wonder where I would be if I hadn't had the VAL team behind me. They changed my life.