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Journey's Success Comes With Help Along the Way

Sometimes all it takes for things to come together is having a few folks believe in you.

He's been through a lot in his life, but Larry Johnson's life is on an upswing in recent months. He credits those folks who have come around him for helping his get to this point.

The employment services staff at Carey Services gets a lot of the credit, along with people in his church. Johnson recently was promoted to full time at the Goodwill store in Marion, about six months after he started working there as a part-time employee.

"Carey Services made me feel important," Johnson said, "and the staff made me feel like family, not that they were just doing their job."

Johnson's struggles with depression and anxiety were exacerbated when he was involved in an automobile accident, which he believes triggered debilitating panic attacks. He also became a caregiver for his mother.

He said it was hard to find and maintain steady employment for about 10 years with his condition and having to care for his mother. After his mother died, he moved to Marion, and he began attending a local church that accepted him and began helping him find ways to deal with his depression and anxiety.

The next step of his journey began in October 2015, when he began working with Carey Services' employment services staff through the state's vocational rehabilitation program. Carey Services' staff began working with him on job readiness training, interviewing help and job placement.

Despite some setbacks along the way, Larry persevered and demonstrated great determination to find employment.

Karen Willhite has been Johnson's employment specialist since March 2016. Their early history was a bit rocky as Johnson struggled with working in the recycling program the department uses as a job-training tool. It turned out, Johnson has a slight detour on his journey and needed to be hospitalized for a while for a health issue.

His perseverance came into play again, as he returned to his job search work after regaining his health. Willhite continued to find creative ways to help Johnson, including working with him on some stress-reducing exercises that could help prevent or lessen a panic attack when he felt one beginning.

One of the big keys, though, involved something new at the agency.

"Larry talked during our initial evaluation that he loved art," Willhite said. When the agency started the Creative Hearts Art Studio in October 2016, Johnson was a

When Johnson started working with art, it seemed to help him open up to the people around him, Willhite said. Soon, others working around him in the studio noticed his talent, and many other studio participants wanted Larry to do some drawing for their projects. Johnson said that affirmation made him feel important again and helped him open up to so much more.

As part of the discovery process with vocational rehabilitation, Willhite suggested she and Johnson visit the Goodwill store to brainstorm job possibilities and see what Johnson might find interesting. The Goodwill manager asked Johnson if he would like to stock an empty shelf with Valentine's Day décor. Johnson grabbed a shopping cart and walked around the store to find items that would create the holiday-themed display.

Fast forward a while, and Johnson was offered a part-time job at the store. Willhite said Johnson was so excited with the news and the feeling it gave him to be part of society again.

After starting work a few hours a week, Johnson said a friend from his church had offered to help him get a car when he got a full-time position. Well, in August, Johnson's life hit several milestones: he became a full-time Goodwill employee, his friend made good on the car offer, and Johnson also has found his own apartment.

"You can see the smile on his face and the pride he has in telling you his story," Willhite said.

Johnson's journey continues, as does the help from people believing in him.