

Testimony of Benjamin Wright

Before the U.S. Senate Special Committee on Aging

Wednesday, July 18, 2018

Hearing on

“Supporting Economic Stability and Self-Sufficiency as Americans with Disabilities and Their Families Age”

Chairman Collins, Ranking Member Casey, distinguished members of this committee -- thank you for inviting me to testify this morning. It has been exciting over the past few years to witness the passing of the ABLA Act, the ABLA to Work Act and the ABLA Financial Planning Act, spearheaded by Senators Burr and Casey. While there is still much work to be done, such as signing the TIME Act into law, I want to thank everyone on this committee for all that you have done and continue to do for people and families living with intellectual and developmental disabilities (I/DD).

As the father of four children, I spend a lot of time thinking about their futures, especially what life might look like after high school for our two youngest children, Beau and Bitty, who have Down syndrome. As most of you know, it is estimated that over 70% of adults with I/DD are unemployed. That is a staggeringly high unemployment rate that should not be tolerated in this country. Imagine any other group where 7 of 10 people didn't have jobs, people would take to the streets, and yet in regards to this group of unemployed people, there is no outrage from the majority of the American citizenry, only bewilderment on the faces of those who endure this discrimination and hopelessness in the eyes of those who love and advocate for them.

It begs the question: Why the complacency? I believe what we're really dealing with is not a classic unemployment problem driven by the economy, but a bona fide social and cultural problem. Doesn't it seem that people with I/DD are not ascribed the same value in our society as those of us without disabilities? What other group of law-abiding citizens can be paid a sub-minimum wage just because of who they are?

And yet, paradoxically, before dinner tonight, every one of us in this room could acquire the equivalent of an intellectual or developmental disability due to an unforeseen event -- and then what? Having an disability is nothing to be ashamed of; it's part of the human condition, so much so that the U.S. Census reports that 1 in 5 Americans has a disability. And yet, here we are -- with an eye-popping 70% unemployment rate.

So, what can we do? I believe if we can find ways to help people WITHOUT I/DD see the intrinsic value in people WITH I/DD accepting and including them should come more naturally.

My wife Amy and I have given this a lot of thought. So much so that 2 ½ years ago, we decided to open a coffee shop called, Bitty & Beau's Coffee, where we employ almost 80 adults with I/DD across three coffee shops and everyone earns above minimum wage. Initially, we thought this was a great way to reduce the unemployment rate. But we quickly realized that the real power of the coffee shop was its ability to show people WITHOUT I/DD what is possible. The point of Bitty & Beau's Coffee is not that people with I/DD can work in coffee shops, but that people WITH and WITHOUT I/DD could and should be working together – shoulder to shoulder -- in almost every type of business.

People need a fresh perspective on this issue. They need to know and understand that people with I/DD are not broken. What is broken is the lens through which we view people with I/DD. Bitty & Beau's Coffee is a new lens – and it's changing the way people see other people – offering a new perspective that once seen – cannot be unseen.

If the goal of this hearing is to support economic stability and self-sufficiency as Americans with disabilities and their families age, efforts such as ABLE and addressing policies that inhibit work for people with disabilities are important. But we must also resolve to help people WITHOUT disabilities see people WITH disabilities, like my children, Bitty & Beau, as worthy of that charge.

Thank you for your time.