

ESBLN Eastern Shore Business Leadership Network
By Jackie Gast, Director

I recently attended The U.S. Business Leadership Network Annual Conference in Pittsburg, PA. I was not very excited about going to Pittsburg; I had been there briefly years ago to watch a Pirates baseball game but really knew nothing about the city. Pittsburg was not what I considered to be a "destination spot". An opinion I came to based on zero information.

The two-plus day conference was very well organized and offered a good variety of sessions. It was well attended by business representatives including HighMark Blue Cross Blue Shield, McDonalds, Nordstroms, Northwest Airlines, SunTrust Bank, Bayer, Mitsubishi Electric, as well as many universities and government agencies.

Many shared their stories. There was Tony Coelho who began his career in the '70's, worked in Congress, at the White House, in private business and has even spoken with Pope John Paul II. While in the White House, Mr. Coelho authored the Americans with Disabilities Act. Mr. Coelho has many accomplishments and is still very much involved in business and government. Yes, Mr. Coelho has a disability and when he finished high school, he was told he could not go into the vocation of his choice because of it. Needless to say, that vocation certainly lost a valuable, hard working individual.

Another told about a registered nurse who was seeking employment. Shouldn't be hard for her to get a job, one would think. This woman self-disclosed her disability (she has a mobility impairment that would be obvious at the interviewing stage). Jobs that were previously open were suddenly "oddly" closed. Corey, a Human Resource Representative, who had a job opening, was impressed with her in a phone interview. He asked his management team if they would like to interview her. They felt that since she had a mobility impairment that she would not be right for the job, and answered "no". Corey, being new, young and naive, decided to press management further and asked to offer her a day at the job to show the team if she could do the work she claimed she could do. This was a typical offer to all potential employees. After all, the company is a rehabilitation institute whose business it is to put people back to work! What better example for clients than to have someone with a disability working for them! Not only could this nurse do the job, but the other nurses found ways to accommodate her further. They moved supplies from higher cabinets to lower ones so she could reach them. They themselves had a hard time reaching them so this accommodation ended up benefiting everyone and cost nothing.

Many people make judgments about and for people with disabilities without giving them the chance to show they can do the job. They've made decisions based on little (or zero) information. Kind of like my visit to Pittsburg. I'd like to go back. It's a really beautiful and vibrant place to be!