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## Willing, Able -- and Unemployable

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By Ann Bauer  
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My 18-year-old son shambles. There's no other word for it. He walks like an old man: scraping the soles of his feet on the floor, tilting his head to one side and tucking it into the space between his neck and shoulder.

What's more, he's mammoth. At 6-foot-3, with at least two inches of mopy hair, he towers over nearly everyone he meets. Because of a penchant for sugary coffee drinks and Qdoba's 3-Cheese Nachos with grilled sirloin, which he buys with the money his grandparents send him, he weighs around 250 pounds. But these are the least of my worries.

Today, what I fret about most is the fact that after two years of submitting applications, taking tests and going in for interviews, he cannot get a job.

Andrew has autism. He was nonverbal from age 4 until 6, and he speaks now, but only with effort. He's also one of the most acute, sensitive young men I've ever known. He is superb at math and chess, weak in the literary arts. Lost when it comes to anything social, from dinner-table conversation to romance. Mostly, he just flashes a persistent, crooked smile.

Above all, he's eerily, compulsively responsible. I was a single mother for five years, and when I left the house, I put him in charge. I would come back to a spotless kitchen and a pile of laundered and folded clothes on my bed.

When he was 16, I told him it was time to get a part-time job. I took him first to the coffeehouse where I wrote each morning, introduced him to the manager and took my usual table. But even from a distance, I could see things weren't going well. The "interview" took three minutes, ending abruptly when the manager offered Andrew a cup of coffee and my son -- ever conscious of the rules -- insisted on paying for it, fumbling with his wallet and spilling coins all over the floor.

I switched coffeehouses and tactics. Next, I took Andrew to Target, a company known for its history of working with disabled people. Only there's a catch: I was told when I called that their policy was to employ "visibly handicapped" workers. People in wheelchairs qualify, as do

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those with Down syndrome. My son, with his eccentricities and halting speech, does not. What's more, Target administers a computerized psychological screening test designed to eliminate people on the outer edges of the bell curve. People like Andrew.

It turns out many companies that hire hourly workers now use this method to winnow the candidate pool. Questions such as "What do you think is the most important quality in a friend?" flash on a screen. At 17, my son had never made a friend. This was the source of his disability. He had no idea how to answer.

Perhaps, I decided, a "starter" job was in order, somewhere he could gain experience and ease into working. So I called a local nursing home that was only too happy to have him volunteer. Twice a week, Andrew spent his afternoons there, visiting elderly people and trundling a library cart from room to room. The residents grew to rely on him. He was unfailingly patient and kind. Yet, when a job came open in dining services -- for someone to take meals to bed-bound residents -- he was turned down, the volunteer coordinator told me, because the hiring manager thought him odd.

Recently, I married a wonderful man whose belief in Andrew rivals mine. "But he's so smart and responsible," said the new stepfather when I explained our now two-year-old predicament. "Don't worry. We'll find him a job."

It turned out he had a friend -- second-shift supervisor at a factory -- who was willing to coach a very timid new hire. Everything had been arranged: The high school Andrew attends scheduled him for morning classes and work-study in the afternoon; I'd given Andrew a car and even coaxed him into getting a haircut. The first order of business was to go to the employment agency that handled the factory's paperwork, take a simple math test and fill out a W-9. Andrew aced the test, completed the forms he was handed and was told he'd be on staff within a week.

Then my husband's friend called, his voice breaking with frustration. He couldn't hire Andrew, after all; the agency had refused to process the application. One of the screeners there was uncomfortable with my son: She had called him -- he apologized before saying the words -- "a potential liability."

Several people have told us that this, finally, is an actionable offense. We could go after the agency for discrimination. But to what end? Legal action wouldn't get Andrew, now nearly 19, working. What it would do is force him to defend himself and his abilities in court -- this young man who's still reluctant to speak at school.

My son is one of many: Some time in the next decade, the Autism Society of America estimates, the number of people in this country who have autism will hit 4 million. I wonder if, when these children reach the age of 18, they too will be unemployable. Or if, perhaps, the work we're doing with Andrew now will mean a different experience for those who follow.

*Ann Bauer is the author of the novel "A Wild Ride Up the Cupboards."*

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