

MY CAREER

Helping disabled people is more a calling than a job

Do you know an executive or leader who has an interesting career story for My Career or My Career Abroad? E-mail mycareer@globeandmail.com

PUBLISHED NOVEMBER 25, 2013



Keenan Wellar and Julie Kingstone are co-leaders of LiveWorkPlay, a charitable organization that helps people with intellectual disabilities become better integrated in their communities.

What is your full name and title?

My name is Keenan Wellar and I am co-leader and director of communications with LiveWorkPlay, a charitable organization in Ottawa that helps the community welcome people with intellectual disabilities to live, work, and play as valued citizens. My title is co-leader because my wife, Julie Kingstone, whom I married in 2001, and I co-founded the organization in 1995 and it became our "co-career" in 1997.

What exactly do you do?

My days are extremely varied. In addition to developing communications and marketing strategies and materials (everything from print to video), I also review communications developed by others. It could be anything from a notice our volunteer co-ordinator is sending to a community newspaper to a presentation our employment supports team is working on for a conference.

In addition to media relations and appearances for LiveWorkPlay, I manage our website and social media channels, which are surprisingly extensive given the small size of our organization. Our sector is highly competitive in terms of both ideas and resources, and there are always threats and opportunities to consider. I like the challenge of responding to them.

What's your background and education?

I have an honours BA in history and a bachelor of education from the University of Ottawa. I earned my MA in applied linguistics at Carleton University in Ottawa, where I also received a non-profit marketing certificate. Most important, I learned that I enjoy communication tasks and problem-solving.

How did you get to your position?

I went from working as a lunch room monitor to a teaching assistant in special education, and from there went on to teachers' college. While I decided I wasn't interested in working in a school, through my connections in education, I ended up with a full-time position in a fast-growing IT company where I spearheaded a federal government project related to disabilities and education.

I met Julie Kingstone through a mutual friend and, as a sideline to our full-time careers (she was working in palliative care), we spent a lot of time with people with disabilities and their family members, and got involved in advocacy. They liked what we were doing and urged us to do more. We got a grant from the Ontario Trillium Foundation and suddenly we found ourselves pursuing a new career path, which was really more of a calling than a job.

The early years were tough. We worked without salaries at times. From 2008-2010, we undertook a massive restructuring. It was not something we were forced to do; we did it because it was the right thing to do, and now our members are having better outcomes – and at less cost to donors and taxpayers.

What's the best part of your job?

We have reason to celebrate every day. Someone gets their first job or apartment, or makes their first adult friend. People with intellectual disabilities are highly marginalized (75 per cent unemployment), so when we see them beat the odds, and have the privilege of helping, it just feels great. Specific to my own communications role, I get frequent messages from people who tell me that they were inspired by our website, or a video, or one of our presentations, and that they made changes as a result. Or, we might recruit a new employment partner or a new volunteer as a result of our earned reputation. That's always a thrill for me.

What's the worst part of your job?

Bad things can happen to good people for no reason at all. We used to support a young man named Rob More who died in the Ottawa bus/train crash tragedy. Communicating with the media about that tragedy challenged me in new ways.

What are your strengths in this role?

This job is not 9 to 5, and neither am I, so it works out well. When inspiration strikes, I like to run with it. There are certain times of year when everyone in the charitable sector needs to be able to run on fumes and deal with being pulled in many different directions. It's not that I don't ever get upset, but I'm usually pretty calm even in the face of really challenging situations.

What are your weaknesses?

I can be very blunt with my opinions about the choices other agencies or sector leaders are making. This is not always appreciated. Although I think I've dramatically improved on my diplomacy, I still earn a pretty high score on the assertiveness scale. It can be hard for me to let go of what I believe is right.

What has been your best career move?

It wasn't easy to go through teachers' college, which offers a clear career path, and just drop it to do something completely different. There wasn't much of a business case for starting LiveWorkPlay; Julie and I just believed it needed to be done. It's great when you can follow your heart.

What has been your worst career move?

It all brought me to here, which is great. I did work my way through university as an overnight security guard, and I think I'm only just now getting my internal clock back to normal. Julie and I tried out for *The Amazing Race Canada*, hoping we'd have a national platform to advance the LiveWorkPlay cause. We didn't get on the show but we came close to getting hypothermia making the audition tape.

What's your next big job goal?

I want to continue to focus outward – to have an impact on changing attitudes about people with intellectual disabilities as fully valued citizens who have the opportunity and freedom to live, work and play in the community like everybody else. This means supporting continued growth of internal leadership so that I can transition more of my time to external communications and relationships.

What's your advice to others who might want to follow in your footsteps?

Taking an entrepreneurial spirit and channelling it into the non-profit sector can be an exciting option for those who would like their work to generate results that have a positive impact on people and communities.

Do you know an executive or leader who has an interesting career story for My Career or My Career Abroad? E-mail mycareer@globeandmail.com