

## **Step & Jump—Facing the Future in a Positive Manner**

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(Hand-Made Cookies, Okaraya)

I went abroad for the first time in my life when I participated in the 19<sup>th</sup> Asian Congress on Developmental Disability in Singapore in 2009. It was in November, yet it was hot there. I heard about the country, where my father once visited on business, and I was looking forward to going there. The pouch I carried was a gift for me, and had some foreign currencies, which I had never seen before.

Ms. Hiromi Saitou, who is one of my work colleagues and delivered her impressive presentation in the congress, inspired me as my senior to follow suit and speak at a future gathering as she did. Upon hearing last fall about the next congress to be held in South Korea, I made an entry out of interest in going there and making my own presentation.

I am in charge of the baking part of the cookie making process at “Hand-Made Cookies, Okaraya”. Though the baking task might seem easy to do, you will find that that is not the case when you actually try it.

I would say that I am now experienced enough to tell whether cookies are well baked or not when I touch them. Besides, I can tell marketable ones from the ones that are not when I see them.

To be honest, I had trouble at first distinguishing good cookies from bad ones. It took me some time and pains to become able to tell whether they have tempting colors when baked, whether they need to be baked one or two more minutes. The difference in thickness among cookies made it hard to tell which ones were No.1 cookies and No.2 cookies until I amassed experience through some painful learning process.

I bake cookies four times or so every day. The experience of baking so many days and so many times has helped me to do my task so well as I do now. Difficulties to bake good cookies do not discourage me from trying to offer to our customers the ones that they truly enjoy.

Besides my work, I was dreaming of participating in the National Sports Competition for People with Disabilities. My dream came true when I took part in the standing broad jump and the softball throw events in track and field as a member of the Yamagata Prefectural Delegation. I was glad that I was there, although I was too nervous to achieve good results. Now I have the next target to achieve, which is to participate in the next round of the same competition.

I love myself the way I am. I used to be too shy to respond when spoken to, and I wanted to change myself.

I had an electronics-related job lined up when I was in the third year of a Special High School for Children with Disabilities. The job arrangement was, however, cancelled in the wake of my job practice in autumn shortly before my graduation. I searched the next job practice opportunity and decided on an institution for older people, which later offered me a job.

I admire a person who is my senior. At that time, I worked diligently on the assignment given to me, so that I could be as good as the person that I admire. The person, who was my senior, and whom I admired, performed her work, and did her volunteer work on the weekend. I thought that I could emulate what she was doing.

They did not, however, recognize my strenuous efforts at the workplace, and I became gradually less confident in my own job achievement. I came to care very little about my job, and finally did not give a damn about it. At one time, I dashed out of the workplace out of desperation. My family suggested to me to quit the job out of the concern for the pains that I was feeling. My family, which consists of my grandmother, my parents, my brother and my sister, has always been supportive. My younger sister in particular propped me up at that time.

After quitting my first job, I began attending a school of homemaking as suggested by one of my mother's friends. While I was psychologically depressed, I continued with swimming and got refreshed living at home. It was my family that helped me to go through this period with their encouragement.

Then I started working at the sheltered workshop where I used to receive practical training in my school days. The assignment given to me was folding socks, boxes and towels as well as the cleaning of the day-service facilities. Those are the types of work that I really wanted to do, and I was glad to do them.

When I held gently one of the hands of a person that I came to know at the institution, I remembered that I used to work at a home for senior citizens. As I became friendly with and took care of her friend, who was visually impaired, I realized that you cannot perform welfare work unless you can put yourself in users' shoes and kind enough to offer helping hands when they stand in need. That idea prompted me to take a helper training course, and got certified.

I became interested in working as a day service staffer. Further encouraged by my parents' advice, I started working as a day service worker.

At first I was able to offer helping hands to clients, got involved in a variety of tasks willingly and sincerely. The experience made me feel as if I finally came to understand what working was all about.

While I worked hard, there were so many volunteer workers at the day service that they deprived me of my share of work, and I often found myself having nothing to do. When I was just about to do something, they offered to help me and actually did it for me. While I was happy about it, I also had a strong urge to tell them not to interfere with my work and to leave me alone. I became less active in and far from being committed to work. Partly because of such relations with volunteers, I became slightly depressed after coming down with complications from a cold. At that point in time, I had no one to count on, and thought of nothing but hurting myself.

At the sight of me staying indoors and taking no meals, my mother took my hands and took me outdoors. Her warm hands and heart opened up my closed mind. I believe that they were more beneficial than any prescription drugs. As I realized that I had such a supportive family, I became really appreciative of what I had.

Then my father's transfer forced us to move to Akita. I quit my job at the day service at the same time, and then regained my strength. I found Akita a nice place to live in, made lots of friends and had a good time there. In Akita I went to a sheltered workshop for people with disabilities. While we were planning to stay there for three years, we had to go back to Tsuruoka a year and half later when my father was again transferred to the city. That move terminated my job at the workshop.

When asked by my mother as to what I would like to do after returning to Tsuruoka, I said that I would go back to the sheltered workshop where I used to work. I thought that I might work again at the workshop where I have lots of friends, rather than the day service. She told me, however, that the workshop might not match its image I had, and instead suggested that we should visit the local support center for people with disabilities to ask for advice about the future. I agreed and went there together out of concern that I might develop depression again.

I visited the two workplaces that the center suggested. I opted out of the first one, which looked favorable, yet which I was not confident in working for. When I told the center about my decision, the staff there suggested that I go and see people from Okaraya Cookie Store practicing table tennis. I consented to it.

Meeting staffers and my juniors from the alma mater at the gym made me somewhat happy and reminded me of the community newspaper article that reported about one of my male juniors

competing in the national sports event. That information made me interested in practicing table tennis to compete on a nationwide basis. I also went to see them practice swimming the next day. In and around the swimming pool I saw even greater number of my seniors and juniors, which made me more motivated. When I could not made up my mind as to what to do, my former homeroom teacher, one of my neighbors, told me about a student of the special school who would start working for Okaraya Cookie Store in April. It was in February that I saw the practice, and that experience alleviated my concern about making new friends when I was to start working there in March.

I decided to work for the Hand-Made Cookie Store Okaraya in the belief that I would be able to keep working there despite some possible difficulties.

My first assignment at Okaraya was measuring sugar and flour to the gram and sifting flour in the cookie making process. With comprehensible instructions from my seniors, I became able to measure the material exactly to the gram. The next piece of work I learned after getting used to the first one was how to measure okara (tofu lees) to the gram and loosen okara lumps till they become smooth and dry. Reserved in the refrigerator, okara becomes lumpy and hard. If you use such okara as is for cookie baking, it looks white when baked. That makes them unsellable. That is why lumpy okara needs to be loosened till it becomes smooth and dry.

While I can perform routines like this without trouble, I did have trouble when I had to do non-routine tasks, when I was suddenly spoken to, when I had to sell to strangers on occasions like bazaars, and had trouble with speaking to others or making presentations to audiences. This made me worry if I could serve to tend the shop when I was given such assignments. When I was diffident and hesitated to take a step forward, my work colleagues at Okraya have encouraged me to go forward.

My seniors and even juniors have helped me with cookie making whenever I do not know what to do or how to do it. Now that three years have passed since I joined the current workplace, I tend to forget how nice they are to me, and feel guilty of being critical of them. I would like to remain grateful to them all the time.

I am now in the fourth year at the current job, and assigned to be the birthday party manager. I take the initiative for people to get together for each individual's birthday and celebrate it in a brief party. I facilitate the party all by myself. For day-to-day work, I am assigned to cookie baking, an important part of the cookie making process. I always try my best to monitor cookies' color and they are baked as good as possible.

Formerly, I could not pluck up my courage to take a step forward, and was diffident. Now I can communicate properly to our customers even when they suddenly speak to me, and shout and sell

our products at bazaars. I was afraid to talk to a great number of people, but now I feel confident to speak to anybody to the extent that I would like to address an audience just like Hiromi did.

My current targets are three-fold: to represent Yamagata Prefecture in the National Sports Competition for People with Disabilities, to be cordial enough when speaking to my seniors, and to bake cookies in such a way to ensure that they look and taste good. While I have not yet thought seriously about my future, I would like to remain positive about it. I would take big steps forward, like step & jump, and care a lot about my family and friends.