

# LEE ABERCROMBIE

## THE BEST PRIZE

*"Far and away the best prize that life offers is the chance to work hard at work worth doing."*

~ Theodore Roosevelt

The following is excerpted from a psychological evaluation of Lee Abercrombie dated October 1987: "...was found to be ineligible for rehabilitation services. He was terminated due to low productivity. {Lee was} evaluated and it was reported that he was not eligible for V.R. services because there was not a reasonable expectation that Lee could become gainfully employed."

Does this sound like a future business owner?

As part of a film project involving participants of a Department of Labor/Office of Disability Employment Policy Grant, I followed Lee Abercrombie in his pursuit of becoming a self-employed businessman. I filmed Lee throughout the experience – from his first casting about to decide what he wanted to do, to refining and researching his dreams, to the fruition of those dreams. Reviewing the film later, I compared the images of Lee from early in the process to those of Lee, the self-employed businessman I currently know. I was struck by a dichotomy. My original film of Lee showed a stooped-shoulder man who tended to sink into chairs rather than sit in them. A man who gave little attention to his physical appearance. On the other hand, Lee the man who emerged from the journey to meaningful, non-stereotypical, employment was another person entirely. This Lee stands tall. This Lee stands straight, smiles often, is quick to hand out business cards. He is, in a word, proud.

It's worth noting that of all the words thus used to describe Lee's employment, the most important and truly telling is "non-stereotypical." Fast food restaurants and retail stores are worthy career paths. But not if they are the only career paths open to you. Lee had a dream that broke past those narrow confines. Lee loves games and computers. And he dreamed of owning his own business. That dream came true. How?

Lee was selected to participate in the Jobs For All Grant based on the qualifying characteristics of having been both institutionalized, and after institutionalization, having been kept apart from his community in a segregated sheltered workshop. The final qualification was Lee's desire to work.

Once identified as a grant participant, the process began with Lee identifying a Job Coach with whom he wanted to work. Lee chose Vicki Philips, a Job Coach with the Cobb and Douglas Counties Community Services Boards. Lee has known Vicki for years and felt that she was a good match.

Vicki's first step in the employment process was to complete a vocational profile with Lee. Despite having known Lee for years, Vicki still felt that the profile was necessary. The reason is that Vicki's experience with Lee was limited to her interaction with him inside the walls of a segregated workshop. The vocational profile gave Vicki the opportunity to truly get to know Lee, to experience who he is when he is in his community.

Through this process, a picture developed that showed Lee's dreams and interests. Lee, with the support of the people in his life, decided to pursue an arcade business that he would own.

As a grant participant, Lee had access to funds that allowed him to purchase two arcade games.

Through the Cobb/Douglas CSB, Lee also had access to the consulting firm of Griffin-Hammis Associates. Lee met with these advisors (co-authors of *Making Self-Employment Work*) seeking guidance and advice in such matters as developing a business plan (critical to both real world success and VR funding,) as well as marketing, market analysis, industry trends, designing the business, and benefits analysis.

Vicki and Lee found a new business in the community that was just starting out. The Royal Care Center is a multi-function facility that includes a car wash, retail space, a barber and beauty shop, and an empty game room. Rod and Cynthia, the owners, had reserved space for this game room, but had not yet found a vendor. Lee, Vicki, Rod, and Cynthia met. They trusted Lee to fulfill their business's unmet need. Cynthia and Lee hit it off on a personal level, and she looks forward to the time Lee spends on site cleaning and servicing the machines, and making change for customers.

Lee spent \$4,000.00 on a 2004 Golden Tee Fore! Golf machine – because he loves golf and his research showed it to be in the top five most popular games. \$2,800.00 was spent to purchase a Ms. Pac-Man/Galaga game to capitalize on 80's nostalgia – a trend also discovered through industry research. Additionally, Lee spent approximately \$500.00 on various business licenses, permits, a pager, business cards, etc. Thus far, the Ms. Pac-Man/Galaga game has consistently increased earnings every week. The Golden Tee has yet to find its audience (even after advertising) and takes in little money.

Expert consultation continues to play a role as Lee's business struggles with these ups and downs common to any new enterprise. Lee consulted with Griffin-Hammis when he realized the Golden Tee machine was under performing. Lee was torn between placing the game in another location – such as a Golfsmith store – or replacing the game with one identified by his customers through satisfaction surveys. He chose to replace the machine.

Currently, Lee is exploring the financial advantage of wage employment as an additional source of income and as a means to making even more contacts within his community.

Lee and Vicki applied for additional funding from Vocational Rehabilitation. There, Lee met his V.R. counselor who supported Lee's employment dreams and his potential. He

was approved for funding. “I like playing arcade games,” Lee said. “I researched arcade games on the internet before making a decision.”

Not bad for a man who carries the label of Down Syndrome. Not bad for a man once deemed as having no employable future.

Not bad for anybody at all.

The processes used to help Lee establish his business were first developed at the Rural Institute and played a key role in advancing self employment strategies across the county.

Produced in collaboration with Cobb and Douglas Counties Community Services Boards, Georgia ([www.cobbcsb.com](http://www.cobbcsb.com)) and Griffin-Hammis Associates, LLC ([www.griffinhammis.com](http://www.griffinhammis.com))