



Story produced by:



Ben Smith, Quality Inspector (at right)
Standing with Kevin Stricklen, Supervisor
Rowmark

48-Year-Old Man Leverages Sobriety, WorkAdvance to Turn Life Around

Ben Smith found WorkAdvance at just the right time in his life. His 30-year history of substance abuse, a recent incarceration and chronic homelessness prevented him from even pursuing a good job because he didn't think anyone would hire him.

But months earlier he'd had an awakening. Literally.

He awoke from an overdose in a hospital after 18 hours of unconsciousness. He was in a deep state of depression having recently turned 48 and feeling like he wasn't getting anywhere in life. When he came to, he met a nurse.

"We got to talking and she said she lost her son to an overdose," he said.

"She told me about a nearby rehab program and thought I'd be interested. I didn't even know places like that existed where you could go and get help. I just thought we had to do this on our own. I decided to go, and I got clean."

Smith said he was "tired of being sick and tired." He'd already seen the dark side of life, and it had been so long since he experienced happiness being clean. He wanted a taste of that life again.

Sobriety leads to new lease on life

"With everybody's help, I was able to do it. I feel like I've been given another chance. Now that I've been clean a year and a week, it's nice. It's really nice."

Smith was staying in a homeless shelter when he learned about WorkAdvance. What attracted him to want to try it? "It sounded very interesting. I liked the idea of going to the college. I thought that was glamorous, honestly," he said.

The two-week job-readiness and technical skills training program was hosted at nearby Owens Community College.

It wasn't an easy road for Smith, but he persevered and ultimately passed all 27 ToolingU modules with flying colors. Even his nemesis, the math course, was defeated thanks in part to individual tutoring from Raise the Bar Hancock County's Wil Schroeder.



Ben Smith performs a quality inspection
(Rowmark)

A rewarding job offer

Smith's reward? A job offer from Rowmark, a Findlay-based manufacturer of signage for the engraving market. Smith said he was comforted knowing there would be transparency about his background when he was presented to employers.

"We don't want to turn anyone away just over something that happened in someone's past," said Haley San Gregory,

Rowmark recruiting specialist. "We want to give people that second chance, and the WorkAdvance program is helping participants get on a better path and do better for themselves."

After 90 days on the job, Smith's enthusiasm and performance have earned the respect of his coworkers and supervisor. He has put his head down, settled in, learned the job, and gotten to work. And if he stays at it, he's got a future at Rowmark.

"Eighteen years ago when I started at Rowmark, I started in the position in which he's currently working, so there is definitely growth opportunity," said his supervisor, Kevin Stricklen.

Smith has also leveraged his access to career coach Jen Galbraith, a staple of WorkAdvance, to confide in and seek guidance when challenges reacclimating to the workforce arise.

Bright future

Smith has since moved out of the shelter and into an apartment. He rides an electric bike to work every day, recently celebrated one year of sobriety, and proposed to his girlfriend (she said, yes, by the way!).

"This is all new to me," he said. "I went from sleeping in a tent just six months ago to having a great job, my own place, a fiancé, a life. But that's what happens when you want to better yourself and are given opportunities.

"If it weren't for WorkAdvance, I'm not so sure where I'd be right now. It really changed my outlook on what I wanted in life. The program was very valuable to me."

And Ben has been a valuable asset to Rowmark, in return.

Workforce Ecosystem Players



Industry Sector Partnership/Trainer



Employer

Habitat for Humanity
Findlay/Hancock County



Trainer/Career Coach



Trainer/Host

Visit tinyurl.com/WorkAdvance for more information on WorkAdvance.



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