

# Nisqually VALLEY NEWS

Covering local news since 1922

## LOCAL NEWS

### Autistics find place in the workforce

By **Melanie Lockhart**  
Nisqually Valley News

Published: Friday, February 26, 2010 3:58 PM PST

Print Page

Being autistic, socializing was never easy for Patrick Pastor.

Even now, initiating conversation is outside the 28-year-old's comfort zone.

In school, Pastor was incredibly shy. It was hard for him to watch the other kids interact with such ease.

Elementary and middle school were the toughest, though Pastor admits it got better in high school. His peers matured and were more accepting.

And his social skills improved.

In elementary school, Pastor was in a self-contained special education class. In middle school, he spent half the day in general education classrooms. By high school, he was fully integrated into general ed.

Pastor maintained a high grade point average and graduated in 1999 from high school in Lakewood. He earned his bachelor's degree from Pacific Lutheran University and attended graduate school at Washington State University, where he completed his masters degree in chemistry.

Now he works full-time at Joint Base Lewis-McChord in the Central Issue Facility (CIF), where soldiers receive and return equipment before and after deployment or transfer.

Pastor is employed through Skookum, a nonprofit organization based in Western Washington that is dedicated to creating living-wage jobs for people with disabilities.

Pastor is diagnosed with Asperger's — commonly defined as a milder form of classic autistic disorder within the autism spectrum. Those with Asperger's often have impairments in two-sided social interaction and non-verbal communication.

Pastor doesn't make regular eye contact. He will for moments, then he will turn his head to the side during a conversation.

Like many people with Asperger's and other levels of autism, Pastor speaks slower than the average person, and it sometimes takes more effort to formulate what he wishes to say.

But he is very articulate.

There was talk recently among medical professionals about his disorder, Pastor said. "They are not really sure whether to keep Asperger's as a distinct diagnosis, he said."

"The traditional criteria for Asperger's is normal language and intelligence, but that is not always the



Patrick Pastor, left, helps 1st Lt. Erik Recknagle turn in his gear at the Central Issue Facility at Joint Base Lewis-McChord. Photo by Melanie Lockhart

case. It's kind of hard to define."

For Pastor, everything is black and white, according to Becky Jackson, logistics tech at CIF and Pastor's supervisor.

If there is a glitch in a computer, Pastor may say something like, "it is not supposed to operate this way," said Jackson, who has an autistic son.

"It's black and white. There is no grey matter there. But his intelligence is off the charts."

It's that intelligence that helped land him his current position as a clerk in Jackson's department.

Pastor started working for Skookum in July 2009. He began in the warehouse for the deployment section.

"Basically I counted items — issued and received items — from soldiers who were deploying or returning," Pastor said. "I was doing a little bit of bookkeeping tasks to help prepare for inventory."

He would put like items into a box, count them, and check if they were serviceable and clean.

Jackson admits she observed Pastor's work for awhile.

"He was always so meticulous about how he did things," Jackson said. "I wanted him to try working in my section. I figured he would like the computers."

In December 2009, Jackson "stole" him, in a sense, she said.

Now he is "abstracting issue turn-ins and demobilizations," Pastor said. Duties include compiling a list of a soldier's items on the computer database, and having the soldier check the list to make sure it's correct before he or she signs and dates it.

The job is rewarding, Pastor said.

"Basically I am helping soldiers," Pastor said. "The military needs people to do the tasks I'm doing. It's important to keep track of military property — stuff that the military has issued."

"I think that a lot of the tasks are things I'm good at," he said. "The job requires a lot of attention to detail. I think that's a strength of mine."

Despite the social aspect of his job being a bit of a challenge at times, Pastor said that the people he works with are one of the things he likes best about his job.

"They are very nice people," Pastor said. "They're patient and helpful when I am new to something. They're just good people to be around. The people here help each other out when we're busy."

Of the 38 people who work full-time at CIF, and 16 who are on call, 86 percent of the people have some disability, said Michor Gentemann, general manager for Skookum's Joint Base Lewis-McChord operations.

Skookum's Joint Base Lewis-McChord contracts include CIF, wheeled vehicle maintenance supply operations, facilities/ground maintenance and sanitation services.

More than 400 people are employed on base through Skookum and the vast majority have a disability — whether physical or mental, Gentemann said.

Pastor's coworkers appreciate him, not only for his intelligence and ability to learn quickly, but for his personality and his overall work attitude.

"He is a really great guy," Jackson said. "If I could have a ton of Patricks, I would. You can never have a bad day with him. If you do, then something is wrong with you."

However, not all days are easygoing for Pastor.

Jackson and his other coworkers recognize that he can get easily overwhelmed, particularly when the environment gets loud at CIF. Pastor also recognizes it and knows his limits.

"He doesn't do it that often, but when he gets overwhelmed he'll step away," Jackson said.

"And he knows it too. He'll say 'excuse me' and find a room or a quiet area, and he'll walk in circles for awhile."

"That's how he copes."

Pastor is no stranger to the workforce. He has held "several jobs," he said.

He performed administrative and clerical tasks for the Pierce County Department of Emergency Management.

"I did data entry," Pastor said. "I helped maintain the database of resources available in an emergency. I helped run project impact — a program that helped the community prepare for natural disasters."

During grad school, Pastor was a teaching assistant and primarily graded papers.

He plans to eventually get a job in the chemistry field.

"The job market for that field isn't very good right now, especially at the entry level," he said.

Pastor said he believes he is very fortunate.

On the autistic spectrum, there are some people who are on one end who can't communicate at all and may never have the means to function well in society, Pastor said. On the other end, there are people who are very well educated and can function as well as the average person.

Pastor doesn't place himself at the highest end of the spectrum, but said he is closer to the top than the middle.

Some of his progress can be attributed to his schooling, which he said was good for the most part, especially while he was in Lakewood. Some can be attributed to family support.

"I have been really blessed in that regard," Pastor said.

He also recognizes that he was diagnosed with a less severe form of autism compared to what other families experience.

Life has its challenges, nonetheless. It's also been full of accomplishments.

He just had to work harder to get there.

Copyright © 2010 - Yelm Online

[\[x\] Close Window](#)