



## The NEAT Podcast, Episode Two

### **Adam**

Welcome to the second edition of the NEAT Podcast! I am Adam Kosakowski, and on today's show we will learn more about the podcast crew. Stay tune as we discuss our backgrounds and our paths to assistive technology. And now here's the host of the NEAT Podcast, Steve Famiglietti!

### **Steve**

On today's podcast, we have a special surprise for everyone. We are going to talk about each other. Because we want you all to know who we are. So Adam is going to tell us about himself. Kris is going to tell us about himself. And I will talk about myself. And this will give you all a better idea of who we are and what we do here at the NEAT Center at Oak Hill.

So I am sitting here today with Adam Kosakowski, who joined our team about six months ago, and has been invaluable to our team.

### **Adam**

Aww!

### **Steve**

So Adam, what is your title here at NEAT?

### **Adam**

Oh, I'm an Assistive Technology Specialist. It feels so good to say those words. I've wanted a position like this for such a long time.

I started out as a biology major that lasted one semester when someone told me that I was going to spend a lot of time in grad school in biology labs. And I was like, oh, that doesn't sound fun. And then I was like, why am I a biology major? That doesn't sound fun. That's problematic. So I switched to math. And I realized, okay, I think I'm going to be a math teacher. I realized I was good at teaching, I used to do tutoring my friends growing up in math classes, and that kind of thing. And I was good at it. But I didn't feel the passion that I thought I should have.

### **Steve**

Well, and I think that I'm stopping you right here for a second, because I think it's really important for people to understand that you're probably going to hear from every one of us today about that how we thought we were going to do a particular career, and we ended up doing a different career. And so for those of you out there that are kind of in transition at the moment, or, you know, just know that it might be that you start out on one path, but you end up down another path and that that's perfectly okay.

**Adam**

But is 1,000,000% true. That is something that I learned about AT, and about disability services in general. No one gets into this type of field through a quote unquote traditional manner, that doesn't happen. So I thought I was going to be a teacher. Thankfully, I figured out during student teaching and not like when I was like two years in to actually teaching that I was like, okay, this isn't for me.

Fast forward, I graduated. And I was like, okay, need a job, obviously. \*Laughing\* But I miss being in the college setting. So I found a part time job, tutoring math, in a disability services office at Western Connecticut State University

**Steve**

My old University!

**Adam**

Your old University! It's a small world. So I went there, and I started tutoring math. And my boss, who I tell everyone under the sun, she was my champion. She was like, you're good at technology! And I was like, you know what...yeah, I guess I am! I never thought of anything of it. And then she was like, can you write me some training guides for all of our AT that we have in the office? Because the training manuals that come with the AT are too long, very in depth. No kid is ever going to read them. And I was like, sure that sounds awesome. I will summarize them and write it up in exactly the way that it should be, with just the pieces that are of interest to our student population, our student population with disabilities, so I did that. I was like, wow, AT is like the coolest thing ever. And it all came easy to me. It was so intuitive. I loved it. And then she was like, you need to go to school for it. And you need to learn more. And I want you to be our offices first Assistive Technology Specialist. So I did all that.

**Steve**

Wow...

**Adam**

I found school. I did some online programming through UConn and California State, Northridge online, so, CSUN. And then after all that, I was basically an Assistive Technology Specialist, just not a full time one, because the only jobs I could ever find were part time.

Then I decided to try out being a Disability Services Coordinator. So I was Director of Disability Services at Clark University. And then I was the Disability Services Coordinator at Bay Path University. And at both of those jobs, I was hoping to have a chance to do more assistive technology stuff. But when you are a Disability Services Coordinator, you are spread so thin, and you're basically asked to wear 30 hats at once and pull it off with no budget. I did that for a couple years. But then I was at a conference. And I saw Nicole's presentation, Nicole Feeney. I saw the tail end of her presentation. And her PowerPoint

was talking about NEAT and everything. And I was like, oh! I've heard of them before. When's the last time I checked to see if they had an opening? That was a couple years ago. I should check just in case...I check the website while she is like 20 feet in front of me. And the website had a job opening. I was like, are you kidding me? And in my head, I thought to myself, this never happens because it just doesn't. You never find a full-time assistive technology job ever. So I got up just enough courage to go speak with her.

And the funny thing was the only reason I got courage to speak with her is because at the front of the room, she was getting ready to leave, and another presenter was getting ready to start her presentation. And I knew that presenter and I knew she was going to call me up and asked me a tech question. Lo and behold, she called me up and asked me a tech question in front of Nicole. I answered it, and then immediately turned over to Nicole and said, so... \*Laughter\* nice to meet you. I just found out that there's a job opening. And I talked to her a little bit about it. And she and I told her, look, I am an Assistive Technology Specialist but I technically don't have the number of years experience I guess you're looking for. I've been in this field, and I've been doing this and that and the other thing, you know, and I have a lot of know-how and you know a lot of like tenacity. But I don't know if I'm exactly what you're looking for, what do you think? Should I apply? She's like, yes, apply. And I was like, oh okay! So Nicole, even before she was my official boss, was already encouraging me. And she told me to apply and I did. And now I'm here and it's literally a dream job.

#### **Steve**

Again, for anybody out there that's kind of thinking about what they're going to do, or maybe they're thinking of changing jobs... You never know what could happen. So you should never think that something is not possible because anything is possible. So Adam what is your role here at NEAT?

#### **Adam**

So I'm an Assistive Technology Specialist. But each of us here have our specialty areas.

I am really into video game accessibility, digital documents-digital accessibility. And I really enjoy working with the man here, Steven Famiglietti, and working with the blind and low vision population.

But obviously, my favorites probably the video game accessibility because I myself am a huge geek. And video game accessibility is exploding. It's now a huge topic of conversation. And I'm really excited to be in a position with NEAT where I can explore it. And I can help people find ways to, despite their disability, game more comfortably and for longer.

So for example, what I did recently was I worked with a gamer with muscular dystrophy. And he was trying to use the standard PlayStation 4 controller, but it was very fatiguing on his hands, especially during long play sessions. Intense competitive place sessions, he plays Fortnite and Call of Duty, it's very tough on his hands. And we found out that a different controller called a SCUF controller was a lot easier for him to press the buttons, they were easier to press with a lighter touch, more comfortable for his hands. And even though a SCUF controller wasn't meant to be a typical AT device, for him it was because it helped him game more comfortably despite his muscular dystrophy.

#### **Steve**

Well, I think that that is impressive. And I've been thinking about this for weeks now and just saying, you know, we get so hung up on finding the right assistive technology for people because they need it for a

job or they need it in the classroom. Or they need it in their daily living. But we never think about leisure, and that part of our lives is so important and something that should not be overlooked. So I'm really excited about this.

**Adam**

Alright, Steve, I think it's time I turn the tables on you.

You've told me here and there about your story coming to NEAT. And like you were saying earlier, there's no dry cut path to becoming an assistive technology specialist. So please, if you don't mind, tell us a little bit about your story.

**Steve**

Well, I went to Western Connecticut State University and wanted to be a meteorologist and studied with Dr. Mel Goldstein, who used to be on News Channel 8.

I was 19 years old and ate, breathed, drank, slept, weather. That's all I did. I used to write weather forecasts and post them on my dorm door. In fact, \*Laughing\* I had forgotten about this, I used to call it Steve Eye Forecast. Like, the eye of the hurricane. And that was kind of fun. But it really was something that wasn't going to work for me. I had to really work through the process of accepting the fact that I couldn't do that as a career, for a number of different reasons. It wasn't just one thing, it was a lot of things that kind of came together.

I really did not have the background in the math and physics and the chemistry that I really needed going into the major. And it made it that much more difficult. I immediately started in the major behind and I probably would have ended up in school for six or seven years. Once I changed my major to communications and I started to do that, it felt like a better fit for me. I had no idea what I would do when I graduated and didn't know what I was going to do after I graduated at all, and kind of went home and did a lot of soul searching, and had a hard time communicating my disability to people. When I would go on job interviews, and it was not really a good time in life. I think that I have a lot of admiration for people that are in school now because I think that things are different 20 some odd years later in terms of helping students get prepared for graduation, and master's degrees, and areas of specialty. Transition services, I think I could have benefited from that, I sort of graduate and felt like I fell off a boat or something. I was floating with no life jacket for at least a year.

**Adam**

I think a lot of people feel that way. I know I did.

**Steve**

It could be.

I was unaware of what other people were doing. I just knew that it was happening to me. And it was a very disconcerting time in my life. I actually ended up getting a couple of jobs that really didn't mean it anything to me at the time. But looking back, they were actually like, prerequisites almost. My first job I worked at an insurance company and Services for the Blind gave me a piece of software called ZoomText. And I was able to use ZoomText on the computer, I didn't really think about what that was, I just did it because I had to do my job. And then that company got bought out by another company. And

so I started working at a commercial collection agency cold calling businesses to try to find out if they had bad debt, that you know that that was a terrible job.

**Adam**

I don't think I can see you're doing that. \*Laughing\*

**Steve**

I made like one phone call a week, I think. I would sit there and do nothing, or I would come up with excuses for ways to take days off from work. And the good part about that was that I had a boss that was very, very smart. And he was a very intuitive man. And he said to me, you know, someday people are going to look at you, but they're not going to look at us someone with a disability, they're going to look at you for the fact that you have a degree and that means you have the ability to think. And that's valuable to employers. And it's just going to be a matter of time. And so I'll pay you to stay here as long as I can if you come into work and try to find a different job because...I tried to quit and he wouldn't let me.

**Adam**

Wow.

**Steve**

He actually found out about a company called Vision Dynamics one day and told me about them and suggested I call them. What I didn't know was he already talked to the owner of Vision Dynamics and told him about me. And when I called that company and talk to Charlie Collins, who was the owner, he already knew a little bit about me because Mr. Harvey called him and said, you know, you might want to talk to this kid. And Charlie is legally blind himself and started a company to sell products to people with low vision or blindness, and I thought that was very interesting. So I thought I really would want to work there. I called Charlie and then got hired in Vision Dynamics and work there for several years. And the first day that I worked there, I couldn't even sell anybody a talking clock. But by the time I left, I was managing the whole sales floor and training people to use computers and technology. And that was all very exciting to me. And I found out about the position here at the NEAT Center, they were starting a new program for blind people. I was very interested in that. So I applied and got hired. And that was almost 14 years ago now, so...

**Adam**

tell our listeners about your current role.

**Steve**

So it's funny because my title is actually Blind Services Vocational Manager, because when the program started, I was the first person to come into this blind services vocational program. And initially, we were trying to see if we could tackle the 70% of blind people are unemployed statistic. But right when we started, the economy just sank. And for a variety of different reasons that didn't work. But one of the things that I was told when I was interviewed for the job was that they really wanted someone who would be able to deal with change, and that we would maybe start out doing one thing, but end up not

doing that thing. And so when we really figured out that, what we were trying to do was really very difficult, we kind of morphed it.

I started working with people and training them to use technology so they could become employed. And we have a contract with the State Bureau of Education Services for the Blind. So I started working with a lot of their clients, training them how to use computers with screen reading and screen magnification software and optical character recognition software. And using those skills to go back to their vocational counselors and then find employment. So I did that for quite a long time and still do that. A couple of times, I've even been asked to work with people like once they get a job, going back and training them with screen readers, screen magnifier is to help them have the specific skills they need on the job to use that technology.

I also conduct assistive technology consultations, evaluations, trainings for individuals with disabilities, their families, their friends, anybody who supports them. So I've gotten involved in working with students in school, students in college, senior citizens, if that's the politically correct term. And we also now work with individuals who are Deaf and blind through the National Deaf Blind Equipment Distribution Program that started back in 2013 as a pilot, and now it's no longer a pilot program. It's actually a regular program through the federal government. And the NEAT Center is a vendor for that program through the Connecticut Tech Act Project. So that has been a really interesting and enjoyable thing for me to do, to work with consumers who are Deaf and blind and has really taught me a lot about that population of people. I feel like I've learned a lot from them. And it's been really educational and fun all at the same time. I don't even know if I've mentioned everything I do here.

**Steve**

So now, I am going to let the listeners learn all about our other producer, the gentleman who you haven't heard much from because he's a very scientific thinker, calculative person. He's the guy that you will see out and about, kind of observing everything, and coming up with solutions for things. So this is Kris Thompson, who I think you've been with us now like three and a half years?

**Kris**

Yeah, I'm on to my fourth year.

**Steve**

Can you, Kris Thompson, tell our listeners a little bit about your background.

**Kris**

I would be happy to and my wife would agree with you 100% about the analytical calculative nature. You'll hear a twain coming out from time to time because I'm originally born in lower Alabama, the Gulf Coast. People don't realize there are some pretty beautiful beaches down there. And so that's you know, I lived there for 25 years...

**Steve**

What's the name of your hometown?

**Kris**

The name of my hometown is Satsuma, which is a citrus fruit that many people probably have never heard of. But they grow them down there.

Graduated high school, I went to school for computer science. Information technology was kind of the hottest fields to get into so...Graduated college and worked for a number of different companies trying to work my way up. I lived in many different places, Tennessee, Florida.

**Adam**

Are you going to mention the one awesome company that you work for them intensely jealous about?

**Kris**

Just before I moved to Connecticut, my last job in the South land was in Pensacola, Florida. I worked for Sega, the Sega.

**Adam**

Segaaaaa! (Singing the old Sega tune)

**Kris**

Yep. And worked information technology, electronics repair, just engulfed in technology throughout my career. And then got a job in Southington, Connecticut and about 10 years ago, and moved up here.

With my wife, we started a family and I was working at a very for-profit organization. And it just wasn't for me, I really wanted to be able to apply my skill set in a way that enhance people's lives. I was having experiences in my own life; my mother had become disabled and was losing the use of our hands in her later years in life.

It really put my life into perspective, you know, after she passed away, I really wanted to be able to use my...

**Steve**

Skill set!

**Kris**

Yes, use my skill set in a way that could help other people and enhance other people's lives. So I was very grateful for this opportunity here at NEAT.

But one of my roles here at NEAT was we had a smart technology demonstration area. And, over time, it kind of became my baby in a way. And I was doing demonstrations, doing the necessary research, bringing in a lot of the new technology and staying up on top of the latest capabilities. So over time, that became my major role. Now I am the Smart Technology Specialist here. And we now have the Smart Home On Wheels. We launched a smart technology assessment program, which I can visit individuals' residences, and meet with them, and make recommendations. See what they want to accomplish and find out the best way to accomplish that by feature matching what their abilities are. We now have a lending library for smart technology. And this a lot of these things just happened within the last year or so. So it's really been exploding the smart technology side of things.

**Steve**

So now I thought it would be a great idea if we each went around and told our listeners a little bit of interesting things about ourselves. Maybe a little tidbit about a part of our lives that we do outside of work that kind of makes us who we are.

And I'm actually starting with Adam, so I be curious if you could just tell us briefly a little bit about something that you do in your life that you think people would find interesting that we don't know about you.

**Adam**

I am a huge geek. I probably my favorite part of geek-dom, is video games.

My favorite video game character is Mega Man and I've loved him since I was a kid. I enjoy playing video games with friends and going on virtual adventures together and stuff like that. I play games with my wife. My wife is also a super geek. Much more now that she's realized that it's okay to be to be a girl geek. We play games together. It's a lot of fun.

There is-it's kind of a sport called boffing, B-O-F-F-I-N-G. And that is when you wield foam fake weapons, like swords. The big thing you typically do with boffing is larping, live action role playing, where you dress up as a fantasy character. And you rent a YMCA camp for a weekend, and someone runs the storylines and come up with monsters for you to fight and that kind of thing. So I did larping, and I also was very, it's one of the few things that I would actually agree that I'm very good at, is sword fighting.

**Adam**

But yeah, I went to ConnectiCon one year, it's a convention for super geeks and that kind of thing. And one year I went and I discovered what boffing was, I had no idea, I entered a tournament, just because I was like, oh, sword fighting? Sure, sounds like fun! And I lost. And then between ConnectiCon that year and ConnectiCon, the following year, I literally trained for a year! I just practiced basically every day. And then when I went back the following year, I wrecked the tournament and got second place.

I actually gave the tournament away to the winner! It was a point system and we hit each other like at the exact same time and whoever hit first was supposed to get the point. But we were so fast that the referees didn't know who got the first hit. And I rose my hand and said, nope, my opponent got the first hit. I felt the contact before I hit them. They looked at me in bewilderment because they're like, are you sure? Like, you are literally given away the tournament. I'm like, no, in my head I have a strong honor code. And I was like, no, he hit me first. He won. And then they announced the winner. All the audience members ran onto the stage towards me instead of my opponent to congratulate me.

**Kris**

Wow.

**Steve**

Wow. That's very humble of you to do.

**Adam**



It was a very, very cool moment.

**Steve**

That is really amazing to hear that.

So Kris, what interesting tidbit of information can you share with our listeners?

**Kris**

Kind of touching on what Adam said, not exactly the same, I used to like to be involved in War reenactments.

**Adam**

Oh cool!

**Kris**

One time when I was still at Pensacola, like literally right before we moved up here, I was a part of like their Bicentennial or something. They've been around. That's one of the oldest settlements in America. There was a big major battle fought there, and I was playing a soldier from Spain. It wound up becoming a bigger and bigger event to where the king and queen of Spain actually came to Pensacola to take part in the event. And I wound up standing as a ceremonial guard for the king and queen of Spain when they visited the United States.

**Adam**

Whaaaaaat?!

**Kris**

Yep.

**Steve**

Wow!

**Kris**

Their Secret Service came and checked my fake wooden musket to make sure it wasn't live! \*Laughing\*

**Adam**

That's amazing!

**Steve**

Incredible!

**Kris**

My interests, I am too a geek, I love gaming, even though I'm not as involved as I would like to be; because my main interest right now are my children, they take up the majority of my time, and I love it.

And I'm very grateful to be a father and I have a four year old daughter and a one year old son and they are just a joy to be around.

**Steve**

They keep on your toes.

**Kris**

They keep me on my toes for sure. In my free time, what I can do in my free time is fantasy sports. I love fantasy baseball, fantasy football, that's a lot of fun for me too.

**Steve**

That is really, really cool. It's so much fun to hear from both of you on the things that you do outside of work.

So now I'll tell you about me. \*Laughter\*

I am a storm chaser. And the reason I want to bring that up is because when I couldn't do meteorology for my degree, I was very angry about that and I was lost. I just couldn't see how that would ever come into my life. It bothered me a great deal. I stumbled upon storm chase tours that are done in the mid-west. Every year I go on one of these tours. Whenever they do their Weather 101, I just love it. I've heard it like 10 times now, maybe more, and I go every time they do Weather 101. I just say to myself, you know it's so wonderful that I've been able to take something that I thought I would do for a career, but I've turned it into a hobby.

Well, I am really honored to have both of you guys co-producing the podcast. And I think it's been great for each of us to share a little bit about what we do at NEAT, what our background is, and some interesting little tidbits about ourselves. Because we really want you who listen to us to feel comfortable listening and to feel like this is a place where you can come and get information and learn about us and what we do.

Thank you for listening to the podcast and you will be hearing from us again very, very soon.

**Adam**

For more information or to subscribe to our newsletter, please visit us at [AssistiveTechnology.OakHillct.org](http://AssistiveTechnology.OakHillct.org) or hit us up on twitter @TheNEATPodcast. Today's podcast was hosted by Steve Famiglietti and produced by Kris Thompson and Adam Kosakowski. Our theme music was composed by Andrew Pergiovanni. Tune in next month for another episode and thanks for listening!