A core job requirement for an artist is strong visual skills. Sean Martell has them, but a visual impairment in his left eye and a learning disability presented challenges as he tried to enter the graphic design profession. Martell needed more than a college degree in graphic design to show he was qualified; he needed help to overcome the obstacles that people with disabilities can face when searching for employment.

Enter Stand Among Friends, a Boca Raton nonprofit that helps college students and adults with disabilities prepare for, seek and secure employment. Michelle Galloway, an employment consultant with SAF’s CareerAbility program, came to Martell’s aid. She helped him prepare for interviews and worked with him on how to write a strong resume and cover letter as well as create a portfolio that would impress prospective employers.

“My goal was to help Sean be more marketable as he made another attempt to find a part-time job,” said Galloway. “We needed to lower, if not remove, any barriers that could get in his way of convincing an employer that he would make a great hire.”

Lending support to Stand Among Friends and its CareerAbility program was The Able Trust, a state-funded initiative that seeks to be a key leader in providing Floridians with disabilities opportunities for successful employment. Last March, The Able Trust awarded Stand Among Friends a three-year, $200,000 grant.
Galloway and Martel’s efforts paid off. In September, a Boca Raton publishing company hired the 33-year-old aspiring graphic artist, where he is now gaining professional experience.

“Through CareerAbility, we built a connection with the company to provide support to them and Sean,” said Galloway.

Among the support CareerAbility helped provide Martell was assistive technology equipment. For example, through CareerAbility’s Vocational Rehabilitation program he was equipped with an Apple computer loaded with voice recognition software called Dragon SpeakingNaturally. Among the software’s features is a speech-to-text program that helps Martell produce text faster and more accurately than he could by typing.

“That software program made a huge improvement in his efficiency as a graphic artist,” said Galloway.

After 90 days on the job, Martell’s transition into the working world was considered a success, according to Galloway.

“The only thing he needed was a chance to prove he was capable of working as a graphic artist,” she said.

A 2010 Harris Interactive survey titled “The ADA, 20 Years Later,” found that only 21 percent of persons with disabilities aged 18–64 are employed full- or part-time, far below the 59 percent reported for persons without disabilities. Ensuring that the underrepresented disability community can find employment appropriate to their background and skills is a top priority of The Able Trust.

About The Able Trust: The Able Trust, also known as the Florida Endowment Foundation for Vocational Rehabilitation, is a 501(c)(3) public-private partnership foundation established by the Florida Legislature in 1990. Its mission is to be a key leader in providing Floridians with disabilities opportunities for successful employment. Since its establishment, The Able Trust has awarded more than $29 million throughout Florida, enabling approximately 2,000 Florida citizens with disabilities to enter the workforce each year. The Able Trust youth programs provide career development and transition to almost 2,000 students with disabilities annually, helping to reduce the dropout rate and prepare young adults for life beyond high school.

www.abletrust.org