



Prosperity Now Conference Reflections By Brad Martin, 2018

My name is Brad Martin, and I am the Program Coordinator for the Volunteer Income Tax Assistance (VITA) initiative at United Way of Southwest Alabama in Mobile, Alabama. I recruit, train, and support volunteers who prepare free tax returns for low income families and individuals and people with disabilities.

The 2018 Prosperity Summit featured such a vast array of speakers, presentations, and breakout sessions. I found it most helpful to have access to the electronic versions of the presentations. Speakers were generally good about presenting key information verbally, but it's nice to have electronic backup, especially for data or statistic-heavy presentations where much of the information is not shared aloud.



Brad as a Disability Ambassador

Financial empowerment is something many of us lack--whether we are people with disabilities or not. But too often people with disabilities, either through conscious or unconscious bias or because of lack of knowledge or ability on the part of practitioners, are too often left out of the conversation when it comes to their own finances. I once had a taxpayer who was deaf ask why he owed money on his tax returns, so with the help of a sign language interpreter, I began detailing the lack of withholding on his W-2 forms and the reasons why that happened. The conversation took some time, but in the end, his response was, "Thank you. Nobody ever explained it to me before. Why didn't they tell me?" In the past, the taxpayer may have gone to a

bad preparer; or he may just have gone to someone who didn't know how to communicate with him, so it was easier to prepare the return and not get into the details. But we all deserve the opportunity to understand, to the best of our abilities, our financial picture because when we understand it, we're empowered to do a better job of managing our finances and our lives.

The Prosperity Summit is a way to get energized about the coming year's work, to connect with people who understand and do what we do, and to learn and grow from our peers. The most exciting thing for me was that I got to meet with the software vendor providing our software concerning accessibility concerns that I expressed due to some changes in the tax forms for 2018. By having an opportunity to demonstrate how people who use screen readers interact with that software, I firmly believe the vendor will make every effort to ensure that I have what I need to be an effective return preparer and reviewer. And in terms of the bigger picture, that helps not only me, but also anyone who is blind and wants to volunteer or work with VITA programs across the country.

The Conference Accessibility Initiative by JPMorgan Chase and WID makes it possible for people with disabilities to have a fuller experience at conferences they attend. In a conference like the Prosperity Summit which has well over a thousand attendees, it's easy for our needs to be overlooked, but the initiative ensures that someone is listening to what we need to fully experience the conference. And an indirect but meaningful consequence of the initiative is that it teaches conference presenting organizations about the need to include people with disabilities in their work, while demonstrating that doing so doesn't have to be a heavy undertaking. In the end, everyone wins, and we are all better for it.

Brad Martin is the Program Coordinator for the Volunteer Income Tax Assistance (VITA) initiative at United Way of Southwest Alabama in Mobile, Alabama. In 2017, he wrote a blog for the free tax preparation field on making tax sites accessible for and communicating with persons with disabilities. He also wrote a chapter in the IRS VITA/TCE Site Coordinator Handbook on the same topics. In addition, he has served as a volunteer consultant to help IRS staff to make their publications accessible to volunteers with visual impairments.