



# THE BEAUTY *and* THE PIT BULL

**THE NETHERLANDS** Marelva Rodrigues is a young Surinamese lady with a ready smile. Vinn de Jong is a seasoned professional with an impressive career. Both of them are participants in Nuon's Step2Work programme.

TEXT David Scherpenhuizen  
PHOTOS Malou van Breevoort

**M**arelva Rodrigues is a smartly-dressed, trendy lady bursting with energy. She is constantly in motion throughout the interview and her infectious laughter repeatedly fills the room. Rodrigues obviously feels at home at Nuon, where she is participating in the Step2Work programme – a project aiming to help the unemployed (re)enter the Dutch labour market.

*What kind of training and educational background do you have?*

**Marelva Rodrigues:** I studied leisure management, but I didn't finish. I was restless and didn't really know what I wanted out of life. The institution where I was studying came into disrepute and I wasn't content there anyway, so I left without a degree. Silly.

*What problems did you encounter in looking for work?*

**MR:** I was at home for about a year. I was invited to dozens of interviews, but the job always went to candidates with qualifications.

*What was it like being out of work?*

**MR:** It wasn't any fun. I didn't have money for anything and all my friends had work. I was lonely and depressed. I worried a lot and had plenty of sleepless nights. Being



**Marelva Rodrigues**

**AGE** 31

**JOB TITLE** Secretary

**LOCATION** Amsterdam

**HOBBIES** Travelling, attending festivals and music concerts, watching soap operas (The Bold and the Beautiful)

rejected all the time is bad for your self-esteem. It wasn't a nice period.

*How did you get involved in Step2Work?*

**MR:** My work buddy at the unemployment services centre informed me about the possibility of joining a work-experience project at Nuon. I sent them a job application and was invited for an interview. I was so pleased and relieved when I was accepted!

*Can you describe the Step2Work programme to us?*

**MR:** I started in 2013 with a special preparatory month, in which you learn to study again. It's important to build up a routine and discipline if you've been out of the loop for a time. After that, I started a level 2 course, which is externally run and gives you the foundation to become a secretarial assistant. That took almost a year, during which I learnt basic skills like typing, maths, languages and so on. I had classes on Wednesdays and the rest I learnt through on-the-job training. I had a supervisor who gave me instructions and training. We got along well and I could always go to her for help.

*What are you doing at present?*

**MR:** Currently, I am doing a level 3 qualification externally, which will enable me to become a secretary. I'm learning skills such as agenda management, minute-taking, invoicing, making travel arrangements

and so on. I am managing the agendas of three managers at present, which is quite a responsibility and a handful. I'll be finished with that soon and then I want to continue with level 4 to become a management assistant.

*What does the future hold?*

**MR:** I'd love to stay at Nuon, but if I can't, I'm sure my chances on the job market are much better. I don't know what would've become of me if not for Step2Work. Now I'm content and have peace of mind. For many years I was trying to work out what I wanted out of life, but I couldn't find it. Now I have something that really suits me, that I like and gives me energy. The future looks sunny!

**A QUALIFYING DISABILITY**

At first Vinn de Jong comes across as a bit formal and shy. Suited up, he immediately takes the lead, acting the perfect host. Once everyone is settled, he relaxes and a big, satisfied grin spreads across his face, one that reappears regularly during the interview. De Jong obviously does not feel at ease until everything is under control.

Step2Work is not only intended for people like Rodrigues, who have to improve their chances on the job market. It's also for people with a labour disability like de Jong, who suffers from an autoimmune disease.

*What did you do before Nuon?*

**Vinn De Jong:** I've always worked,



even though I'm officially unfit to work because of my chronic disease. At one time, I did the logistical administration and accounting at a large company. During the last few years, I worked 40 to 60 hour weeks as an event manager. However, my condition deteriorated so much that I eventually had to stop working completely.

*How did you join Step2Work?*

**VDJ:** I wanted an administrative job so I could work less and accommodate my condition. I wrote to a lot of big companies, inquiring about the possibilities of working there with a disability. Step2Work was one of the few programmes to emerge and it's the best as far as I'm concerned. After an intake meeting, I was suggested to HR for a 20 hour a week role. I hadn't initially applied for the position, but the recruiters felt it was the most suitable job for me. It turned out to be a good choice.

*Are you satisfied with the role?*

**VDJ:** Of course. It was a sort of salvation because I wanted to strike a better balance between my work and my health. I don't need to work, but I prefer to keep busy in a big company with people around me, instead of staying at home. Step2Work allows me to do that.

*How long have you been at Nuon and what do you do?*

**VDJ:** I started Step2Work in August 2012. I do the administration for social projects at HR; subsidy appli-



**Vinn de Jong**

**AGE** 45

**JOB TITLE** HR Officer

**LOCATION** Amsterdam

**HOBBIES** Swimming, fitness, voluntary work for people with ostomy and cancer – and last but not least home decoration

cations, that kind of stuff. It's a lot of number crunching; it's very meticulous work and that suits me.

*What are your colleagues like?*

**VDJ:** They're a good lot. They don't treat me any differently or pity me. Quite the opposite; they call me a real pitbull because once I sink my teeth into something, I don't let go until I get everything out of it I can. For instance, I go through all the different subsidy options with a fine-toothed comb and apply for them. That way, I add value to the company and pay my own way. They realise that.

*What happens next?*

**VDJ:** I'd like to stay at Nuon, if possible, because it's a company that really sticks its neck out when it comes to giving people with a disability a chance. Other companies would do well to follow their example.

**THE STEP2WORK PROGRAMME**

The Nuon Step2Work programme offers vocational training and a year of work to participants. Participants are people without a proper education or people with a disability. They receive the minimum wage for the duration of the programme.

The purpose of Step2Work is to give participants an entrance to the labour market. Since the start of the programme in 2006, over 400 people have completed the Step2Work programme, with over 50 per cent finding job after completion.

In the Netherlands it is quite common for larger companies to run social employment programmes. In fact, some procurement contracts are only given to companies that demonstrate social responsibility. Nuon has four supplier contracts with a social return on investment (SROI) specification. As part of these contracts, Nuon is required to provide 12 Step2Work contracts a year in 2014 and 2015. The programme owes its existence to the terms of the national collective labour agreement.

