

Breaking Barriers

everybody belongs • everybody serves



Church Family Supports Dream Job

by Rachel Riphagen

employment supervisor, Hope Haven, Rock Valley IA

From the first day I met with Rachel Schuld to talk about her employment goals, she consistently said she wanted to work at a daycare facility. Rachel's caring, calm, positive manner would make her a great asset to almost any employer, particularly one that provides care to children. So it should be easy, right?

Not quite, at least for a person who—though possessing many great qualities—has an intellectual disability. Fortunately, Rachel was willing to work hard to prove herself. She took a cleaning job with Service Master to earn money while volunteering at a daycare in her community to gain some experience. Next, she got a job as a bus monitor for a local preschool, which she did in addition to her work with Service Master.



Rachel Schuld

While Rachel enjoyed those jobs, she still had the dream to work full time at a daycare. That opportunity came in November 2015 at Kingdom Kids Community Daycare, which was looking for someone to work 30-40 hours a week in the toddler and infant rooms. Rachel interviewed for the job and was offered a position on the spot! Perfect, right?

Not quite, since Kingdom Kids is located 15 miles from where Rachel lives and public transit is virtually non-existent in rural northwest Iowa. Rachel is working towards getting her driver's license, but doesn't have it yet.

Rachel and Ellen (her aunt and guardian) came up with the idea of talking to fellow members of Trinity CRC in Rock Valley to see if any would be willing to help out with rides. The response has been overwhelming. Church members sign up weekly to get Rachel to and from work each day, and Rachel pays them a small stipend to say thank you (though many volunteers have yet to cash those checks). Without the support of her church family, Rachel's dream of working with children might not have happened.

Rachel loves her job and the kids she gets to work with, and they love her. Thanks to the support of many individuals, those kids benefit from Rachel's creative and loving spirit every day.

Themes

Fall 2016—**Disability and employment.** Although the unemployment rate of people with disabilities is about double that of people without disabilities, both employers that have hired people with disabilities and people with disabilities who have found employment have stories to tell.

Winter 2017—**Disability and spiritual practice.** As someone who belongs—body and soul, in life and in death—to Jesus Christ, how has living with a disability shaped your own spiritual practice? Where do disability and your devotional life intersect? Please send us a note reflecting on your experience by **November 1, 2016.**

Spring 2017—**Paid caregivers.** Many people with disabilities receive supports from other people. If you hire and manage caregivers for your own support, receive support in a group home or other living situation, have a loved one who receives paid support, or if you are paid to give care to a person or persons with disabilities, please send us a note about your experiences by **February 1, 2017.**

Email: mstephenson@crcna.org • tdeyoung@rca.org



Stephanie an MVP in Proving Herself

by **Sandy Uthoff**

Rockford (MI) Reformed Church

Our daughter Stephanie is 33 years old and has lived with disabilities since she was born prematurely at 27 weeks gestation. She is learning disabled, has mild balance issues due to cerebral palsy, and lives at home. She is engaging and has many friends.

After high school she was enrolled in a few community-based programs that placed learning-disabled adults into businesses to get work experience. Stephanie was placed in a health fitness club, where her job involved doing laundry, vacuuming, and folding towels. Her hours were short, usually in the morning. When this school-based program was completed, she became employed with the fitness club—in part because they appreciated her work ethic and desire to please. We were excited that she had a job that she looked forward to, gave her something to do, and was a source of pride.

When the club was purchased by another health fitness organization a couple years later, we thought she would continue in her role there—until we learned that all employees had to reapply for their jobs. This was the first time Stephanie would have to sell herself in a job interview, and we were all nerv-

ous. Many club members were cheering her on.

The interview went very well. She answered the questions asked and felt good about how it went. Though her parents were not as confident as Stephanie, she was rehired and did it all by herself.

Her job today with MVP Athletic Club is to pick up towels, run the washers and dryers, pick up the locker rooms, clean lockers, and help wherever needed. She works four-hour shifts three days a week, and it's perfect for her. We bring her to work and a Hope Network bus brings her home.



Stephanie Uthoff

Employment has given Stephanie so much self worth, and she has made many friends through the club. Employees respect her as part of the team, and she is dedicated to her job and coworkers. We are blessed to have a fitness club in our community that sees the value in each individual, gives them a chance to be employed, and in turn allows them to give back to the community. ■

Work Blends Heart and Hand

by **Gerry Koning**

Trinity CRC, Grandville MI

Our daughter Leslie does not qualify for any type of sheltered workshop employment programs due to the severity of her disability. However, this does not mean that she cannot have a meaningful job or even a business. With this in mind we have started a limited liability company for Leslie called Heart in Hand Birdseed, LLC. Leslie produces birdseed blends and sells them.

Part of Leslie's therapy program includes hand-over-hand therapy. This means that when Leslie's caregivers brush her hair, they put their hand over Leslie's hand and together brush her hair. This is the same for washing her face and brushing her teeth. So we thought that we could use this concept to help Leslie mix special birdseed blends. We buy the

various ingredients in bulk and then place them in shallow boxes around her wheelchair. Then, hand over hand, she scoops just the right amount of each ingredient. Hand over hand, she mixes the ingredients into her special birdseed blend. Hand over hand, she pours the birdseed into plastic bags and staples a label on the top of each one. At present she is selling these bags of birdseed at a farmer's market near her home.

This is a slow process, but we are not working for volume or big paychecks. We do this so that Leslie, who loves to watch birds, can find joy in doing something productive and somewhat profitable. It provides good therapy for her; it allows her to use her God-given gifts and to provide something for herself; and, we believe, it gives her a sense of accomplishment. These are all things that everybody in this world should be able to attain. ■



Serving Students with Empathy

by **Pete Gordon**

LaGrave CRC, Grand Rapids MI

I am a person with disabilities. I have severe hearing loss, learning disabilities, and processing disorder. I speech read and have hearing aids, but these are only supplemental.

Throughout much of my academic life, from elementary school to seminary, I've been in special education classes, remedial classes, and on academic probation.

I was admitted to college on probation. I was required to take academic support classes (no credit), but was charged tuition for them just the same. I was already behind in my freshman year. I graduated a year after the rest of my class.

I needed to find work, normally hard for anyone, despite disabilities. The first job I found after college was part-time janitor and stock boy in a clothing store. My hours were constantly reduced.

I went to seminary, under restrictions and on probation. I received a two-year degree in four years.

While working in churches as part of my education, I was sometimes told by well-meaning pastors that the ministry was “no place for a deaf person.” After seminary I worked a series of restaurant jobs ranging from dishwasher, to busboy, to short-order cook. Although there is nothing wrong with any of these jobs, my employment experiences were peppered with managers not understanding my disabilities and responding by reducing my hours, altering my job

description in an attempt to help me, or even encouraging me to quit.

In 1993, I began work in group homes and sheltered workshops for people with disabilities. That work lasted for eighteen years until I was “downsized”—my employer citing my disabilities as a major consideration in my termination.

Through prayer and good advice, I went on to do a second stint in seminary and, eventually, to become

a commissioned pastor. Now I work as a campus pastor to students with disabilities facing many of the same challenges I did and still face. Jabez Ministries@GRCC (1 Chronicles 4:9-10) focuses on discipling students with disabilities as they realize goals in higher education. ■



Pete Gordon with students

Employment Partnership a Win-Win

by **Becky Oudshoorn**

Evergreen Ministries (CRC), Hudsonville MI

Preferred Employment and Living Supports (PELS) and Walters Gardens Inc. (WG) began working together to create jobs for adults with disabilities. The two businesses, both passionate about supporting the local community and offering inclusion, worked to place seven people at Walters in plant processing and custodial positions. “This entire project and partnership has been very uplifting for all involved,” said PELS president Deb Tober.

PELS staff provided the screening of applicants and on-the-job tryouts. WG and PELS worked together to make necessary accommodations including on-site job coaches to eliminate specific barriers for workers. Fulltime employment has been a barrier for many adults with disabilities, but WG was willing to offer part-time schedules for these employees.

WG greenhouse processing manager Cherry Medrano said she selects work assignments for the group that will allow for the greatest success. Although it took some time for her staff to become comfortable with the workers hired in from PELS, Medrano now sees employees working side by side, sharing in celebrations and break times together.

“Self-confidence is by far one of the things I have seen increase in our clients,” job coach Dave Saylor said. “They have a sense of purpose. They rise to the challenge every time.”

As human resource director at Walters Gardens, I have been pleased with the process of working with PELS and having the support of PELS staff. The work ethic of PELS workers is outstanding. ■



'I Am Glad When I Can Help Others'

by Diana Wallingford

Mountainview CRC, Grimsby ON

When I was three years old my mother died. I have never known my father, but when I was seven years old I was blessed with two loving parents, Jerry and Helena Zantingh. They

knew I had special needs, and over the years they have helped me to care for myself.

When the chaplain of Shalom Manor, a Christian home for seniors, told me more than 20 years ago that the home was looking for a young lady who could make the beds and tidy the rooms for the residents every morning, I applied and was hired. After some time I was asked to work in the laundry room and that is what I am doing now. I really like it there.

Most of the people I work with call me Smiley, because I guess I smile a lot. I like the people I work with, and I am happy I can serve so many elderly

■ Editor's Note

Employment Connections

Besides the obvious benefit of income, for most people work is a blessing that contributes to healthy self-esteem, physical and emotional health, and life expectancy. From the beginning, God called people to participate with him in the work of caring for creation (Genesis 1:28, 2:15).



Before the Industrial Revolution, I would guess that everyone, except people with the most severe disabilities, contributed their part to the needs of the household.

Work has changed dramatically since the time most people farmed the land, and many people with disabilities have been left out. In the U.S. and in Canada, the employment rate of adults with disabilities is below 50 percent.

This issue of *Breaking Barriers* features stories of people with mild, moderate, and severe disabilities who have found meaningful work. We celebrate their employment, and we ask you to remember that they are the exceptions.

In every story, the people with disabilities received help in securing and getting oriented in their jobs, but then *everyone* who has a job has had assistance from others with getting the job, getting oriented, and doing the work. Churches are ideal communities for making these connections. For more information on how your church can begin walking with people with disabilities in their employment journey, click on the link, "See How Others Put Faith to Work," at www.faithanddisability.org.

—Mark Stephenson



Diana Wallingford

people. My supervisor thinks that I am doing an excellent job and that I am a blessing to the residents and to many of the people I work with.

I may have some special needs, but I am glad when I can help others in their needs. In our church I am a member of our Friendship Club. When we had a Friendship service last year, I was asked to read the Bible lesson. My pastor said that I did a good job and that he would ask me to do it again.

God is really good to me. I have loving parents, many friends, and a wonderful church. I hope I can continue to work in the laundry room of Shalom Manor for a long time yet. ■