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People with disabilities gain valuable work experience in Flanders

By PHIL GARBER Managing Editor Dec 13, 2015



MOUNT OLIVE TWP. – Stacy has been working since 2009 at “Presents of Mind” in Flanders and she just might stay a bit longer.

Stacy, whose full name was not used, has a developmental disability but that hasn’t stopped the 33-year-old Flanders woman from working at the non-profit Flanders store two days a week and on Thursdays and weekends at Marshall’s in Chester.

“I have a lot of different jobs,” said Stacy who works at “Presents of Mind” from 12:30 to 4:30 p.m., Wednesdays and Fridays. “I love working with my friends.”

Stacy said she is saving for holiday gifts. She is among a group of about 10 men and women from their early 20s to their 50s with various disabilities who work for minimum wage at the Route 206 gift shop. They work an average four hours a day, one to five days a week and help with everything from running the register to keeping the store clean. All employees are referred through the state “Real Life Choices” under the N.J. Division of Developmental Disabilities.

Stacy was hired at Marshall’s after working with the employment specialist at “Presents of Mind.”

The store sells trendy, classic, and humorous gifts, gourmet foods, local art and exotic teas. It is owned and operated by Community Options Inc., a non-profit organization that provides employment supports to people with disabilities.

The employees gain career experience in retail and store management, learn point of sale software, soft-selling and customer relations skills, retrieving and processing of orders through the website, inventory management, store layout and design, and different forms of presentation and display.

Andrew Park oversees the store and a Community Options "Vaseful" flower shop in Edison. Community Options also offers the "Daily Plan It," an office, conference and copy center that offers furnished office rental space or virtual tenancy to businesses. Some of the services provided to the tenants include professional receptionist services, clerical support, high-speed color copying and on-site concierge services including dry cleaning pick up and delivery.

Career Experience

Employees receive work experience in areas such as customer service, inventory management, quality and database management, as well as facilities maintenance. The "Daily Plan It" has locations in Morristown, Princeton and Moorestown, and Dallas, Texas.

The Flanders store opened in 2008. The store director, Rose Rivera, has been with the facility since it opened. Park has been with Community Options since 2009.

"We use the store for employment training of people with disabilities," said Park. "They do an amazing job. Community integration is key to what we do."

Park of Parippany was born in Korea and came to the U.S. in 1996. He attended James Caldwell High School in West Caldwell and received a bachelor of science degree in criminal justice from Rutgers.

"I was fascinated with the whole aspect of helping others in need," Park said.

Rivera of Stillwater said she had various social services jobs including working in a nursing home and a group home.

"I like working with this population," Rivera said. "They teach you more than you teach them."

They help you appreciate the small things in life.”

“Presents of Mind” is open from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m., Mondays and Tuesdays; from 10 a.m. to 9 p.m., Wednesdays, Thursdays and Fridays; and from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m., Saturdays.

Community Options, Inc., based in Princeton, was formed in 1989 to develop residential and employment supports for people with severe disabilities, utilizing technology and training.

Community Options has programs in New Jersey, Arizona, Kentucky, Maryland, New Mexico, New York, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Tennessee and Texas. The organization also provides support services in the UK, Eastern and Western Europe, and the Middle East, said the website.

