

## Morris County program helping disabled keep jobs

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Jerry McCrea/The Star-LedgerSusan

Clavadetscher, left, and Dan Reddington both sales associates at the Presents of Mind store in Flanders. Presents of Mind helps train the disabled to be productive workers in the real world.

Susan Clavadetscher got a few jobs after high school in Chester Township, but when employers started cutting her hours, her concerns about having Down syndrome grew.

Refusing to face rejection, she joined a nonprofit organization based in Princeton called Community Options Inc., which offers people with developmental disabilities opportunities to learn job skills, gain work experience and, eventually, earn a living.<http://www.comop.org>

In June, Clavadetscher, now 24, was hired as a cashier at Presents of Mind gift shop in Mount Olive.

"They make me happy," she said of the staff of the national program that helped her find a job -- and keep it. The West Morris Mendham High School graduate works at the gift shop four days a week.

Her mother, Martha Clavadetscher, is pleased not only with the program, but by her daughter's success.

"It was a relief to me. I wanted her to be successful," she said.

The gift shop is the latest store to join six other nonprofit businesses operated by Community Options. The other stores include Vaseful, a flower and gift shop in New Brunswick, and three Daily Plan It office and print shops in Morristown, Moorestown and Princeton.

Through Community Options' program, disabled participants receive counseling with employment specialists who help them work on their job skills as they receive a paycheck. There are currently 240 people in the program, and many move on to jobs in the mainstream market.

"It's kind of a springboard for employment," said Janet Rosequist, director of Northern Jersey's Employment Services for Community Options, which also offers computer training and classes on job development.

There is no cost to enter the program, which is funded by the state's Division of Developmental Disabilities, said Chris Dixon, executive director of Community Options Enterprises.

Eight people in the program are working at Presents of Mind in Flanders, where they are processing orders received through the store's website, and learning inventory management and store design.

Store managers said they are thrilled about the work ethic they bring to the shop.

"It's helping most people open their eyes to that whole segment of the population that wants to work, has the ability to work, but has been politely put to the side. They are the most motivating people I've ever managed because they are just excited to be here and work in a real retail environment," said Daniel Kehrley, assistant manager at the gift shop.

Employees in the program are treated as any other worker. They must show up at work on time and complete all their duties.

Most participants tend to stay in the program for about a year before transitioning into other jobs.

"We want people to learn, and build a skill set and use those skills to find a job that is outside of Community Options," Dixon said. "However long it takes, we will work with them."

Program counselors even accompany job seekers to interviews with prospective employers. "We are with them every step of the way," said Rosequist, noting the difficulty they encounter convincing employers to hire people with disabilities.

"It is tough. They have a hesitation and think they will have issues with them," she said.

The organization also provides sign language classes and advocacy club meetings that remind participants of their rights, Rosequist said.

"It's a wonderful program," Rosequist said. "This is something they will take with them for the rest of their lives."

For more information about Community Options Enterprises call (609) 951-9900.

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