

Supported Employee Program Provides Meaningful Work, Equitable Wages

Leslie Hobaugh has an amazing memory for names, dates and times. Meet him once, and the next time you see him, he can tell you the exact time and date of your first meeting.

Leslie grew up in the now-defunct Fairview Hospital, along with other people with mental and physical developmental disabilities. He is deaf and communicates through sign language, gestures and writing.

For 13 years, Leslie worked at a warehouse, tearing down boxes. The job did not pay minimum wage, and there often was not enough work to fill the day. Leslie also did not have his own workspace, which was necessary for him to feel secure. The job wasn't a good match, and Leslie expressed his frustration in inappropriate ways.

In 2006, Leslie's life took a pleasant turn when he met Melissa Miller, a job developer at United Way Cerebral Palsy of Oregon and Southwest Washington (UCP). A three-year United Way grant funds UCP's Supported Employment program, which provides support and advocacy for people with disabilities to gain skill development, secure meaningful employment, and achieve equitable wages.

For the past year, Leslie has been working as a tearsheet clerk for Community Newspapers Inc., publisher of the Portland Tribune and other community newsweeklies. Leslie's task is to review newspaper editions, cut and collect print ads, and mail them to businesses that purchased advertising. Leslie feels that he is respected and treated fairly by his coworkers, and enjoys the fact that he has his own cubicle.

According to supervisor Michael O'Shaughnessy, Leslie is a great fit for the advertising office.

"Leslie has a terrific sense of humor, and still completes his work while having a good time. As time goes by, Leslie has expressed interest in taking on other related tasks, and has excelled at them as well," Michael says. "What's more important than the great job he is doing are the relationships we're developing with him. It's encouraging to see everyone in our office learning bits of sign language."

"The best part is that his coworkers enjoy him thoroughly," says Melissa. "He has not experienced the anger or frustration that haunted him in other jobs."

UCP believes that every person with a disability has the right to work at a job that fits their skills and interests, and offers an opportunity for advancement, says Melissa.

“We may help people find vocational training or help match them with a specific job – but it’s the people we support who chart their own courses toward job satisfaction,” she says.

Some 68% of 50 million people with disabilities in the United States are unemployed, and most would prefer to work and support themselves. The Supported Employment program works alongside employers to determine workplace needs and find win-win solutions to provide employment for people with disabilities. Staff helps with companies with filing tax credits, training and supervision, ADA compliance and job accommodations, among other resources.

Local companies are urged to find out more about UCP’s Supported Employment program and explore how workplaces can benefit from employing people with disabilities. Call Melissa Miller at (503) 777-4166, ext. 244.

Taken from <http://www.unitedway-pdx.org/>