



'These young people want to work': Special-needs students find jobs through training program

Loading Photo Gallery

Sally Pearsall Ericson | sericson@al.com By **Sally Pearsall Ericson** | sericson@al.com

Email the author | **Follow on Twitter**

on June 05, 2014 at 6:30 AM, updated June 05, 2014 at 6:37 AM

MOBILE, Alabama -- Project SEARCH, a new program for students with developmental disabilities in Mobile and Baldwin counties, already has a stellar success rate: jobs for 16 of the 19 who participated.

Mobile Infirmary and Thomas Hospital were the host sites for the program, in which the students trained in 10-week rotations, learning all types of jobs at the hospitals, including clerical work, patient supervision, assisting the nurses, food service, and cleaning and transporting medical equipment.

In addition to the training, the students gained a new independence; for example, many of them had never ridden a city bus before, but they learned to do it as part of their daily routine.

"They're at a real worksite and learning real-life situations," said Christine Wells, a special education teacher in the Mobile County school system who has been running the training program at Mobile Infirmary.

There were nine Mobile County students and 10 Baldwin County students enrolled with Project SEARCH.

Special-needs students tend to enjoy entry-level, repetitive types of jobs -- the very jobs that tend to have a high turnover rate, Wells said.

The students began the program last fall with orientation classes to help them become adjusted to their new surroundings, and to be more at ease when meeting new people. It wasn't always easy at first, Wells said. "They're not used to change."

Within a few weeks, she said, she noticed a big difference in the students' social skills and self-confidence. Students who formerly wouldn't make eye contact were learning to introduce themselves and shake hands.

The students were very involved in selecting their jobs at the hospital, Wells said. Those who enjoyed cleaning learned janitorial skills; those who liked to cook were given a chance to work in the kitchen.

At every step, the teachers would make sure that both students and their trainers had the resources they needed, Wells said. The jobs tended to mirror a typical school day, with a check-in about 7:30 a.m., a five-hour shift and a break for lunch.

"These young people want to work, and they want people to give them a chance," said Carol Statter, liaison for Project SEARCH and a workforce development coordinator at Infirmiry Health. The hospital employees enjoyed working with the students, she added: "Everybody loves these kids."

Deondre Smoots, a graduate of Augusta Evans Special School, did so well in the outpatient therapy department that he has now been hired to work in the cafeteria at Washington Middle School, which is close to his home. "We tried to place him where it would be convenient for his family," Wells said.

Paris Blount, 19 and a graduate of Blount High School, is going to be a nursing assistant at the hospital. Her duties will include keeping watch on patients who are at risk of falling. Recently, she kept a close eye on an elderly patient who kept saying he wanted to get out of bed – and made sure he didn't. "I guess he was confused," she said.

Blount and her grandmother, Anne Blount, came to Mobile Infirmiry together so that Anne Blount could learn more about the scheduling system for nursing assistants, who sign up online for 12-hour shifts as part of the "sitters pool."

Their visit was a reminder, said Wells, that the program can only succeed if the students' parents and guardians are also on board.

"It's a team effort," she said. "It's very hard when you have a child with a disability," and many parents find it difficult to allow their children the wider range of independence. "The parents are heroes," Wells said.

Other Project SEARCH success stories in Mobile include David Byrd, who will work at Providence Hospital; Rebecca Jackson, who has been hired by McDonald's; Cynthia Tenorio, who sorts clothing donations at Goodwill Easter Seals; Thomas Fuller, hired by Walmart; and Clayton Yakola, who works at the Little Sisters of the Poor Sacred Heart Residence.

At the Project SEARCH graduation ceremony on June 3 at Mobile Infirmiry, Mobile schools Superintendent Martha Peek was among the guests.

"This is one of the best programs we're involved in," she said. "The employers tell me that they love working with these students. They love to come to work. They don't want to miss a day."

Project SEARCH was the result of a collaboration with the Mobile and Baldwin county school systems; Infirmiry Health; the state Department of Education; the Department of Developmental Disabilities; Volunteers of America; the state Department of Rehabilitation Services; and the State Department of Mental Health.

© 2014 AL.com. All rights reserved.