

Aiding in the search to fulfil dreams

Appleton's St. Elizabeth Hospital helping disabled high school students attain lifelong vocations

BY STEVE WIDEMAN | FOR THE COMPASS

APPLETON — A wide smile built on confidence and achievement flashes across Tala Abouzelam's face as her computer screen comes to life.

Abouzelam's small, but strong fingers glide purposefully over the keyboard as she begins to input and organize data destined for the records of the Affinity Health System Foundation's office at St. Elizabeth Hospital.

"I would like to work in an office, because it requires a lot of organizing work and I like to organize things," Abouzelam, 20, said about starting her third of three 10-week internships at St. Elizabeth as part of "Project SEARCH."

Project SEARCH is a nationwide program aimed at teaching employability skills to intellectually and developmentally disabled students from age 18-21. St. Elizabeth, part of Ministry Health Care, which owns Affinity Health, is in its first year with Project SEARCH.

Seven students are currently enrolled in the program which trains disabled students seeking enough work skills to earn entry level, high turnover jobs.

Project SEARCH helps St. Elizabeth fulfill its mission as a Catholic medical facility, said Tonya Dederer, regional director of the Affinity Health System Foundation and Project SEARCH business liaison.

"Our mission is to live out Jesus' healing ministry by providing programs and services, especially focused on the vulnerable and the poor, in communities we serve," Dederer said.

When the idea of joining Project SEARCH, founded in 1996 at Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center, first came to St. Elizabeth's 18 months ago, "It didn't take long for our leaders to say 'This feels like the right thing to do to serve the vulnerable in our population,'" Dederer said. "We are really feeling this is a mission-driven activity. We feel compelled to help out."

The foundation operates as the local program's fiscal agent in partnership with the Appleton Area School District, Valley Packaging Industries, the state's Department of Workforce Development and Community Care,



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Tala Abouzelam (left) an intern in the Project SEARCH vocational training program at St. Elizabeth Hospital in Appleton, inputs information into a computer aided by Tonya Dederer, regional director of Affinity Health System Foundation Inc.

an advocacy and support group for people with disabilities.

The program has drawn more than \$22,000 in cash, services and equipment from the community, including \$15,000 from the Schmidt Family G4 Fund Committee, \$5,000 from SAC Development Disabilities Fund, \$1,300 worth of portable phones from CCC Technologies, Inc. for use by job coaches Project SEARCH instructors and \$1,500 from Arrow Audio for a large-screen monitor so all the students can see power point presentations.

Last December, Gov. Scott Walker presented St. Elizabeth Hospital with an Exemplary Employer Award in recognition of its work to encourage the full participation of people with disabilities in the workforce, specifically through Project SEARCH.

According to information on the Project SEARCH web site, the program started as an initiative to fill high-turnover, entry-level positions that are repetitive and detail-oriented — two skills common among people with intellectual or developmental disabilities, especially autism.

Dederer said students in the program have completed all the academic requirements for high school graduation, but must complete three unpaid internships through Project SEARCH.

"Students with disabilities can stay in high school up to the age of 21, based on their abilities," Dederer said.

Students must complete an application and undergo several interviews to be selected for the program.

"We don't just let them go into any role they want. We make sure their job skills are relevant to internship possibilities," Dederer said.

A full-time special education teacher along with full-time job coaches, assist students in their internships. In the case of St. Elizabeth, staff members acting as mentors support the students on an individual basis if necessary, Dederer said.

"Helping an individual with a disability is very heartfelt by those who help. It actually increases happiness among the staff," Dederer said.

Abouzelam, who attended Appleton

North High School, said staff at St. Elizabeth have helped in the first two of her three internships.

"They're always available if I need help and answer all my questions," she said.

Abouzelam, who is very soft spoken, completed her first internship in the hospital's fourth floor nursing unit where she did general clerical work and, in her spare time, organized food in the department's employee refrigerator, labeling each shelf with its contents.

"I made it easier for the nurses to find things, which I find is very satisfying work. I've been organizing things since I was very young. I would always put my things away," she said.

Her second internship involved scanning and filing documents and escorting patients in the patient access office.

Abouzelam recently began her third internship doing clerical and organizing work in the foundation's office. "It's a fulfillment of my dreams," she said.

Dederer said that, while some students might be hired by the hospital, "we can't hire them all." Project SEARCH is currently searching for employers who might have the right kind of entry-level jobs to match the student's internship experience. The goal is 100 percent job placement.

For Abouzelam, the thrill of her latest internship is all-encompassing in the short term.

"I'm excited about working for 10 weeks in the foundation office probably doing a lot with my organizational skills," she said. "My long-term goal is to get a job in the community in an office setting. Project SEARCH has helped me to try different jobs and gain new skills so I can be more confident. It's a program that will help us find jobs we like."

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