

Internships help people with disabilities spread their wings



Jeffrey Nelson at work at Jewish Senior Life.

By VELVET SPICER

As the final third of Jeffrey Nelson's internship with Jewish Senior Life gets underway, Nelson said he feels ready to find a paying job, probably in a kitchen.

"I really like food preparation," he said.

Nelson is part of Project Search, a program that pairs an agency that serves individuals with intellectual and development disabilities with a business that can offer internships in a variety of areas. Through Heritage Christian Services Inc., Nelson has completed two internships with Jewish Senior Life and has started the third and final leg of the 10-month program.

"Project Search, maybe 10 years ago, started here in the state, but there's like 500 employers across the country that do it. Project Search was brought to Rochester through the Golisano Foundation," Mike King, Jewish Senior Life CEO, noted. "I have my own special needs son so I became familiar with Project Search through my own personal story."

King reached out to the Project Search team a couple of years ago and before long Jewish Senior Life was paired with Heritage. The program debuted at Jewish Senior Life last October and has eight interns.

The now-worldwide organization was founded in 1996 by Erin Riehle, who was director of Cincinnati Children's Emergency Department. Because the hospital served individuals with developmental disabilities, Riehle felt that it made sense that the hospital should commit to hiring people in this group.

"Project Search finds the agency, they partner them with an employer, and then Heritage receives funding from the state for a couple job coaches and a job instructor," King said. "Once that happens then you start building the curriculum."

The whole idea behind Project Search is to train individuals on job-readiness skills, as well as the soft skills needed to thrive at work, said Shawna Boynton, the Project

Search instructor with Heritage.

"We do a lot of exploration, and we call it discovery," Boynton said. "We're figuring out what people love to do and what their skills are. So we try to give people opportunities that they enjoy, but try to really help them learn brand new skills as well so that it's preparing them for employment."

The internships are broken into three, three-month sections, and interns are rotated through different career areas at Jewish Senior Life. Those areas include the kitchen, rec therapy, concierge services, housekeeping, medical records and more.

"We really were wanting to offer opportunities that these young adults don't typically have," said Christine VanVessem, Jewish Senior Life vice president, staff & organizational development. "When you think of this population you kind of go right to dishwasher or housekeeper. So while we had those available, we also looked at concierge desk responsibilities, laundry tech, cultural arts support or assistant."

"The important part also was that we were offering diverse (opportunities) to meet the interests of the interns," VanVessem added. "So Heritage was responsible for, when they applied for the program, assessing their interests and really what their goals were for jobs."

Each morning the interns meet with Boynton or one of the Heritage job coaches to learn and review soft skills such as time management, professionalism and stress management. That's followed by their four-hour internship, and at the end of the day the interns meet back at the Summit at Brighton—a retirement community on the Jewish Senior Life campus—to reflect on their day.

"The purpose is to gain all those skills to really do some exploration to find out what people want to do, what they're good at, what their likes and dislikes are and then to support them in finding employment," Boynton said.

Nelson previously had worked at Fairport Baptist Homes and at the Greater Rochester chapter of the American Red Cross, he said, but both jobs were volunteer work. He has come a long way since that time, both he and Boynton said. Boynton previously knew Nelson through a day habilitation program he attended at which he had to be supervised.

"There were supervision levels and you really weren't reaching your potential," Boynton said, addressing Nelson. "You're a very smart man, you have a lot of things to offer people and being at this day program just didn't give you a lot of opportunities."

Nelson said the internship has taught him how to get along with people and to try to do his best each day.

"Try to be on your best behavior," Nelson advises other interns, "or you get nowhere."

Kassandra Mason, Nelson's Project Search mentor for the second round of his internship, said she has had an opportunity to see him flourish.

"I am a cook over at the Summit," Mason said of her role at Jewish Senior Life. "I give him directions on getting certain supplies for me and Jeffrey gets them for me. When we're doing a specific job like making sandwiches he will do it. He's grown quite a bit."

Project Search has two age groups for interns, King noted, including 18 to 21 and 22 to 35. Jewish Senior Life's interns are in the older age group.

"What happens at age 21 is you hit this cliff. You don't know what you're going to do," King said of individuals with disabilities and their families. "A lot of parents send their kids to college or they go out and get a job, but when you have a special needs child you really wonder what's going to happen. Now we have this program ... you can come in and learn how to be successful in a career."

Despite positive comments from the Project Search team, the program has not been without its challenges, those involved acknowledge.

"It's honest," said Marianne Durrant, director of the employment services program at Heritage, of the feedback she receives. "We're not all 100 percent all the time and people need supports for a reason. So our coaches are being very honest and letting us know when there's challenges and really being creative in how we provide the teaching to the interns."

Added VanVessem: "When you take on a new employee or an intern it slows you down, it slows your productivity down. So we have been mindful of that."

To that end, when Mason discovered an issue with Nelson remembering the various things that need to be dealt with in the kitchen, she turned to her mother, who works at BOCES, for help.

"And we came up with an idea as far as making a chart and writing down what type of sandwiches had to be made and the numbers, and Jeffrey had to check it off on which ones he made," Mason said. "And that I think helped a lot, and now he doesn't even need it."

VanVessem said although the challenges have been there, there were fewer than she expected.

"We're coming up on the end of our first year, and we've seen a lot of growth and progress with the interns that have joined us," Durrant said. "We're excited to see that the interns, with their previous experience—whether that be in habilitation programs or workshop settings or other volunteer-type settings—that they're really growing and are excited to move into the next step of their life as they finish the program."

And Project Search has had some unexpected positive results, the team said.

"It's a great program. I'm glad I had the opportunity to be part of it and see these women and men grow to who they are," Mason said, noting that the program has helped teach her patience.

For VanVessem, whose department has its own intern, the program has been a win/win.

"All the mentors have found it to be very rewarding work. It brings job satisfaction to their day, kind of challenging them as staff," she said. "It's been a great program. I kind of get emotional talking about it because it's been something that's breathed new life into my job."

And the program has the potential to mitigate the recruitment challenges a business has as a result of the low unemployment rate, VanVessem noted.

"Our industry is needing to develop strategies not considered before to address the need for skilled, front-line staff," she added. "As the business partner for Project Search we are investing in a program that can tap into a rich resource of employable adults. What we have discovered is that our interns have exactly the characteristics we are looking for in employees—hard working, person-centered, customer focused and willing to learn. All they need is an opportunity to build upon their life and job skills in a supportive work environment."

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