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LIFESTYLES



USING THEIR ABILITIES — Jamie Tanton, left, Bridget Tuinstra and Kevin Williamson want people to see their abilities, not their disabilities.

Workin' for a livin'

Employment program helps area individuals become more independent

By YVONNE BENDO
The Daily News

Being developmentally handicapped doesn't mean that you can't be independent. It merely means that you need an extra helping hand along the way.

And support workers Bev Trinca and Ron Coristine, with the Chatham and District Association for Community's Living's Vocational Employment Services, are there to do just that.

For Bridget Tuinstra, Jamie Tanton and Kevin Williamson, it means they're learning to do more things on their own. And they are just three of the 21 local developmentally handicapped individuals who are benefiting from this program.

Today, they are working out in the "real world" where they are accepted by their colleagues and bring home a pay cheque.

With the help of their support workers they are also learning to keep their financial and personal matters in order.

Twenty-year-old Tuinstra has come a long way in recent years.

program and her family.

"We encourage them to maximize their potential for independence," he said.

Through the Vocational Employment Services Program — which is non-profit and government funded — a professional relationship is established between businesses to develop a remunerative employment opportunities and provide on-the-job training and support to persons with disabilities.

This is done by first ensuring that the clients are ready for community employment, their values and skills are matched with the needs of the company, and that all parties involved benefit from the experience.

Tanton, 31, is also working in a competitive market where he loves to meet new people everyday.

He, too, has come a long way from doing woodworking at ARC Industries. Since November, 1990 he has been employed at Loeb William Street. He initially took a job as a custodian and was recently promoted to packer.

That puts him in more contact with the customers, and he enjoys that better.

While he is independent, he said, "when I need Ron (Coristine), I call him."

And he has called on him to help with not only keeping his finances in order, but also helping him go through a difficult divorce.

"I'm like a big brother," said Coristine.

He added, helping Tanton and others like him, keep their personal lives in order, helps them to perform better on the job.

"It's a good sign that we don't get called on daily," said Trinca. She added all 21 people in the program require different levels

matter of letting them know they can speak to someone whenever they need it."

The success of the program is the withdrawal and the eventual elimination of support, however, the support is always there should an emergency arise.

That support, however, isn't just provided to the clients. Employers can also call on the support workers to assist in any problems that arise on the job, and to help other co-workers deal with working with a developmentally handicapped individual.

"The program has been well received and some employers are willing to give these people an opportunity," said Coristine.

"The focus is on the ability rather than the support that is required."

Joyce Carr, a program manager with the local association, said "this is not someone with a developmental disability, but a person they accept as an employee."

"This gives them an opportunity to realize they are there on equal grounds," said Coristine.

And that's exactly how Williamson feels as he celebrates his fourth year working as a Whiteprint Operator at Union Gas.

Here he admitted he makes good money and he has become an integral part of the office.

"This isn't charity, we have lots of good talent here that employers have to tap into," said Coristine.

He said the only difference with these individuals is they need an extra helping hand.

"The strength of this population is their dedication and commitment to the job," added Carr.