

~~Disabilities~~ Discovered

Bethesda Thrift Shops Changing Lives

BY ROSS BOETTCHER

For more than a half-century, millions of shoppers and thousands of dedicated volunteers have made the Bethesda Thrift Shops a successful, revenue-generating operation for Bethesda Lutheran Communities.

In 2012, Bethesda launched the Ability Hire initiative in its thrift shops to provide meaningful, community-integrated employment and job training for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

Bethesda uses profits from its thrift shops to help fund programs and provide services for people with developmental disabilities whom the organization supports.

“The Bethesda Thrift Shops are the ideal place for people to develop skills and earn a wage,” said John Nickels, executive director of Bethesda Enterprises. “We are thrilled to be utilizing our national network of stores to help bring more employment opportunities to people with intellectual and developmental disabilities.”

In its first year, the Ability Hire initiative netted impressive results. Many of the 21 adults with developmental disabilities hired through the initiative have made great strides in advancing their professional skills while boosting their self-confidence and ability to succeed in the working world.

The following stories feature some of the individuals who are thriving because of the initiative, and the people—including thrift shop co-workers and volunteers—who have helped make their employment, and success, possible.



Kathy Anglin (left), donation attendant, Minnetonka, Minn.



Sharon Simmons (left) and Karen Danielson, store greeters, Minnetonka, Minn.

Thrift shops offer fulfilling work

Prior to landing jobs at the Bethesda Thrift Shop in Minnetonka, Minn., Karen Danielson and Sharon Simmons had jobs that did not meet their individual needs.

Danielson, 42, worked in the deli department of a major retail store, where she prepared chickens for roasting. At times, when Danielson's supervisors gave her additional responsibilities, she became overwhelmed.

Then her anxiety would kick-in, sending her into a downward spiral that affected her work and dampened her bubbly personality. As a result, Danielson started to miss work, said Jon Krug. Krug works as Danielson's and Simmons' job coach through the organization Partnership Resources.

Meanwhile, Simmons, 54, was working in an elementary school cafeteria, cleaning and washing dishes. The job was not fulfilling because her manager constantly hovered over her, restricting any sense of independence.

The Ability Hire initiative is designed to help people with intellectual and developmental disabilities gain skills without a manager or job coach supervising every move. Job coaches are used to teach new skills, communicate with employees and answer questions.

"The goal is to help employees be successful and allow them to work in an atmosphere that encourages independence," said Jack Vater, corporate director of retail operations at Bethesda. "We are increasing their confidence and skill levels so if they are successful in their job at Bethesda, they can use those skills to get jobs elsewhere."

"Everything changed in 2012 when Danielson and Simmons were hired by Bethesda," Krug said.

Danielson's outgoing personality now shines with Krug's occasional help. Danielson works with volunteers at the Minnetonka shop to design outfits for mannequins, and greets and answers questions for customers.

In Danielson's first year as a store greeter, she did not miss a day of work.

"I've learned that if I need help, I shouldn't hesitate to ask," Danielson said. "Whenever my stress levels are getting overwhelming, people come and help me."

Simmons has difficulty reading, and early during her employment at Bethesda, she was easily distracted after finishing a task, Krug said. Since then, she has learned to use a visual routine card created by Krug, and has opened-up socially.

The results, Krug said, are a function of Bethesda's forward-thinking approach to creating independent jobs for adults with developmental disabilities.

"It's refreshing to see an organization like Bethesda be on the forefront of hiring adults with disabilities," Krug said. "It's a cycle—people with disabilities working in the store, helping to make money to support other people with disabilities."



Lee Rozinski, store greeter, Baraboo, Wis.

Determined to make a difference

In June 2012, when Lee Rozinski realized he was being offered his first job, his eyes welled-up and his heart thumped in his chest.

For the first time in his life, Rozinski, 22, had a job. A job he was passionate about. A job where he could help people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. People like him.

"I'm able to make a difference here and that's what I want to do," Rozinski said. "I want to show other people that everybody's equal."

Three years before he was offered the paid position at Bethesda's Baraboo, Wis., Thrift Shop, Rozinski distinguished himself as a volunteer greeter at the shop. Rozinski's work ethic and friendly demeanor made the decision to hire him an easy one for Tracie Lange, the Baraboo store manager.

With the help of his part-time job coach, Peter Mordini, employed by the Wisconsin program Include, Respect, I Self-Direct, Rozinski

has gained additional responsibility at the shop. In his expanded role, he is charged with pricing, organizing, and managing the store's multimedia section, which includes books, movies and other media platforms.

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—Lee Rozinski

"He needs to continue growing, and he has the ability to do that," Mordini said. "He just needed the opportunity."

Through Bethesda, Rozinski plans to develop his professional skills before pursuing his ultimate goal, attending college and starting a career as a motivational speaker.

Bethesda has empowered Rozinski to set the bar high for his future. Rozinski's disability will not stand in his way.

"I don't want to stop here. I want to keep going," Rozinski said. "You can accept the fact that you're different and try to rise above it, or you can do nothing about it. I will never give up on my goals, and I'll always keep pushing forward."

"Anything is possible if you put your mind to it and give 110 percent."

Rozinski's supporters believe in him, too.

"Lee never looks at himself as having a disability," Lange said. "He is a great, positive asset to the store because, to me, Lee is what Bethesda's mission is all about."



Alex Renner, donation attendant, Horicon, Wis.



Michael Fowler, store greeter, Saginaw, Mich.

Personal growth spurs independence

Alex Renner is becoming more independent as a person and as an employee at the Bethesda Thrift in Horicon, Wis.

Renner, 18, goes about her work quietly and is more independent since she was hired by Bethesda in July 2012, her mother, Tracy Renner said.

“This job, it’s awesome. You never know when you have a child with disabilities how much they’re going to be able to do independently,” Renner said. “The fact that Alex is

able to do this job without any real assistance is spectacular.”

The thrift shop has provided a great environment for Renner to learn the responsibilities of having a job.

“I’ve noticed a big change in Alex’s self-esteem,” Renner said. “In the school system, she hasn’t had a sense of self-reliance. She has always been guided through life until this point, so the fact that she can make decisions and act independently is really important.”

“

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Persistence proves key to landing a job

For eight years, Michael Fowler spent his spare time volunteering, gaining skills that would help him land a paying job.

At times, doubt crept in.

“Sometimes, I didn’t think I would get a job,” Fowler said. “I was waiting to see if it was meant to be.”

It was meant to be. Fowler’s goal came to fruition in September 2012,

when he was hired as a store greeter at the Bethesda Thrift Shop in Saginaw, Mich.

Fowler, 26, has thrived and wears many hats for the store, said Les Russell, the store’s manager. Fowler greets customers, cleans, organizes, and, when the store is busy with shoppers, appears at the cash register, bagging customers’ purchases.

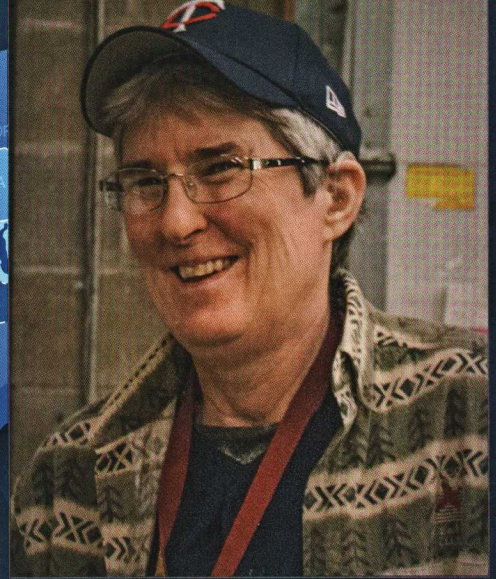
“Michael spoils us,” said Fowler’s co-worker Connie Witovsky. “Whenever we need something done, he doesn’t hesitate.”

The experience with Bethesda has helped Fowler become more social and financially independent.

“At work, I get to meet a lot of new people and keep busy. I like being busy,” Fowler said. “So, I’m always happy when I’m here.”

Bethesda Thrift Shop FACTS

- The stores launched in the '50s as garage sales at Esther Coleman's Watertown, Wis., home.
- Before they were renamed, the thrift shops were called "Economy Centers."
- In 1960, Edna Vehlow was the first person hired to run Bethesda's Watertown Thrift Shop.
- In 2012, Bethesda's Thrift Shops generated \$875,000 in profits used to fund programs for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities served by the organization.
- Until 2009, the shops were entirely run by volunteers.
- The thrift shops now have about 100 paid employees.
- There are 20 Bethesda Thrift Shops in eight states.
- Bethesda supporters donated goods 72,000 times in 2012.
- In 2013, Bethesda's Thrift Shops are projected to make 720,000 customer transactions.



*Kathy Anglin, donation attendant,
Minnetonka, Minn.*

Confidence soars with employment

During Kathy Anglin's first months of volunteering at the Bethesda Thrift Shop in Minnetonka, Minn., it was clear that, despite her tall stature, she was short on confidence.

Anglin, 54, was not comfortable asking for help. She hesitated when she had questions.

Could she accept this donation? What items should she sort next? Limited by the fear of doing something—anything—wrong, Anglin was a tentative volunteer.

Now, after on-the-job training to improve her self-assurance and customer service skills, Anglin has grown into a confident worker. After becoming a key member of the volunteer team, Anglin was hired in May 2012 as the Minnetonka store's first Ability Hire.

She has built fantastic rapport with thrift shop donors, and helped organize the Minnetonka shop's back room. According to Pat Bellefeuille, the thrift shop's manager, Anglin is no longer afraid

to ask questions. She is comfortable with her co-workers, and reflects a work ethic instilled in her while working on her family's farm.

"I started volunteering at the store for something to do on Saturdays," Anglin said. "I believe in what this store stands for and I've found a purpose working here—to help other people. It just so happens that I, myself, am one of the people I help."

The Ability Hire initiative advances Bethesda's core mission of supporting people who have intellectual and developmental disabilities to live their lives to the fullest.

"This initiative proves our mission," Bellefeuille said. "We are helping people with developmental disabilities. You can make a difference in their lives, and you can make the right kind of difference. You can help people gain self-assurance and self-confidence, so that when they leave here, even just to go home, they have a different attitude."