

Linwood Center provides a helping hand

Share Your Blessings

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Posted 11/26/08



Tim Noel, Kenton Arthur and Lamar Fuller sort clothes at the warehouse for Good Deals Great Stuff, the Linwood Center's retail, donation and recycling center. The store provides integrated employment for adults with autism in Linwood's adult services program. (staff photo by Sarah Nix)

There is still warmth in the workplace these days.

There are still places that look out for their workers, even during the holidays.

The Linwood Center, a nonprofit organization in Ellicott City, is just such a place.

Its mission is to create opportunities for people with autism. For more than 50 years, the Linwood Center has provided services and resources for those with autism, and their families, to assist and enhance their participation in community life.

To observe the center is to observe a family atmosphere, so much so that adults who can't go home for the holidays join the staff's family.

"The staff takes folks home to spend Thanksgiving and Christmas with them. It's really cool," director of adult services April Jensen said.

And for those in the program, it can be really cool to make money. "I like to work and I like money," said Tim Noel, 21.

In November 2006, Linwood opened up the store, Good Deals, Great Stuff, in Elkridge to provide adults with autism a place to work. After adults complete their training with the center, the goal is for them to work in the community alongside workers without disabilities.

"Everybody who doesn't work in the community works here," said Cheryl Greene, vocational support coordinator for the adult program, referring to the store and a warehouse. She said seven adults are working in the community, at places such as Sears, McDonald's and Wal-Mart, three work in the store and as many as 17 work in the warehouse.

"The main objective is to get them out in the community," Greene said, "to get them used to a work schedule and then out into the community."

The clothing available at the store comes from donations either dropped off at the store or at the Howard County and Carroll County landfills. The processing of the clothes used to take place at Good Deals, but over the years the amount of donations grew so vast that Linwood moved that part of the operation to a warehouse in Columbia on Berger Road.

At the warehouse, the workers sort through the clothes and donations to organize them and decide which can be sold and which will go to Row Textiles, which pays by the pound for the donations that can't be used by Good Deals.

Denise Murray, 31, likes working at the warehouse, likes hanging up clothes and enjoys the money she earns. The workers decide how they're going to use that money -- whether it's for something at home or leisure. Murray and others from Linwood recently went on a cruise to Bermuda.

The workers spend four hours a day doing work and then have time to relax and watch a movie or focus time on writing or drawing. Sometimes the staff and workers hang out at the mall and go to movies together.

Executive director Bill Moss said the idea behind Good Deals is to teach adults social and behavioral skills. "The workers learn when it's appropriate to do this or that," Moss said.

It can be difficult for people with disabilities to find jobs, so Linwood has a job-development employee who goes into the community and talks with employers to find out what skills they are seeking. The adults receive coaching for job interviews and help with filling out resumes.

Then they go through the hiring process and are either hired or continue working for Good Deals while they look for another job opportunity. If they're hired, Linwood employees accompany or check on the workers to ensure it's beneficial to the worker and the employer.

At the store, the workers deal with customers and have the social interaction they'll need in the workplace. "The goal is to have everybody placed in an integrated workplace," Moss said.

Said Jensen, the director of adult services: "One thing I find fascinating, when you look at individuals with autism, you find they have compulsive interests. We try to find what characteristics they have and find a job for them. We look at matching people up with their interests and strengths."

Added Moss, "We put the people first before the disability. We provide the opportunity to have a typical, normal life."