

Improved technology opens door *Advances create more opportunities in the workplace for disabled*

BY JUAN ANTONIO LIZAMA
TIMES-DISPATCH STAFF WRITER

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A blind person can work a computer by using voice recognition; a quadriplegic can do the same with eye movement.

"There's more technology out there that is making people with disabilities successful employees," said Dana Rosanelli, business-development manager of Virginia Business Leadership Network. The network is part of a national organization led by companies that hire qualified workers with disabilities.

Technological advances can allow more people with disabilities to enter the work force, advocates said.

Take, for example, Eyegaze. The "eyetracking" computer system works through a video camera mounted on a computer and tracks a person's gaze point on the screen or keyboard. A key clicks or an icon opens up when the person's eyes pause on specific objects.

This technology lets someone who is immobile to work from home via a computer.

Andrew Imparato, president of the Washington-based American Association of People with Disabilities, said that in terms of technology, younger people with disabilities have an advantage.

"They have been exposed to cutting-edge technology in school," Imparato said, adding and they are more comfortable using it than older disabled people are.

Despite the technological advances, employment of people with disabilities during the past 20 years has increased little, Imparato said.

"I think that people with disabilities who acquire their disabilities on the job can stay on the job longer [because of technology]," he said.

Even with advances, Fortune 500 companies have not been as open to hiring disabled people as smaller businesses, Imparato said.

Jim Rothrock, commissioner of the Virginia Department of Rehabilitative Services, said technology has made it easier for employers to hire more people with disabilities.

"We have found that we can hook up people from a hospital bed, from home or from any site. [Technology] has opened so many jobs and many more paying jobs than those where people with disabilities have been traditionally pigeonholed."

Financial help is available. The Assistive Technology Loan Fund Authority offers the disabled low-interest loans for a wide variety of special-needs equipment.

The authority offers guaranteed loans to families on fixed incomes as well as to working and middle-income families with significant medical and rehabilitative expenses.

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A job -- and affirmation

Cafe is an employer and a training center for those with disabilities

BY TYRA M. VAUGHN
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Chip Young can't stop smiling these days.

Customers entering Max's Positive Vibe Cafe in South Richmond are greeted by his bubbly personality and infectious smile.

But a year ago, the 21-year-old didn't have much to smile about, let alone working.

"I had to sit at a desk day in and day out and answer phones, and the only time I got to interact with people was when they called in," said Young, who worked in one of the research labs at Virginia Commonwealth University.

"I'm a people person, so it was hard for me not be able to interact with other people."



Chip Young (right) chats with Elizabeth Gillie (left) and Lori Hall at Max's Positive Vibe Cafe, which hires and trains people with disabilities. BRUCE PARKER/TIMES-DISPATCH

But since February, Young has worked at the Positive Vibe restaurant as one of its three hosts, where he meets and greets patrons.

"I love it," he said. "This job has given me so much self-respect and afforded me so many opportunities."

The opportunities that Young and many of his co-workers now have may never have been possible if not for the Positive Vibe Cafe, they say.

Young, like many of his co-workers, is disabled. He works from a wheelchair, which makes finding meaningful employment hard.

"Being disabled, a lot of businesses don't want to hire you and a lot of doors are slammed in your face," Young said. "So you get stuck with a job you hate just because they'll hire you, which gets discouraging."

According to census figures, just under 20 percent of Americans have some form of disability. The unemployment rate for those between ages 21 and 34 is about 33 percent.

But the creators of the Positive Vibe Café are attempting to change those statistics by providing meaningful jobs and training in the food-service industry for the mentally and physically disabled.

"A lot of disabled individuals become discouraged with the job market after being turned down for job after job," said Garth Larcen, the restaurant's co-owner and manager. "They need to do something, [and] more importantly they want to do something. That's what we're trying to do here."

The idea for the Positive Vibe Café came three years ago after Larcen's son, Max, who was diagnosed with muscular dystrophy at age 8, became increasingly frustrated and discouraged with the job market.

"Max couldn't find any employment, and I knew I had to do something. So we kicked around a few ideas and decided on a restaurant," said Larcen, a former insurance agent and restaurant owner. "We decided take the idea a step further and train disabled individuals for a jobs in the restaurant industry."

Larcen and his son, now 27, established the GetLostMD(Muscular Dystrophy) Foundation to create the restaurant, which also serves as a training school.

The 70-seat restaurant, located in the Stratford Hills Shopping Center off Forest Hill Avenue, opened in January. It serves lunch and dinner daily except Mondays.

The Positive Vibe Café employees 24 paid workers, 14 of whom are disabled. Those disabled employees work in the kitchen prepping food, clean off the tables or act as hosts. But the restaurant relies on a larger number of wait staff and bartenders who are volunteers.

The other mission of the Positive Vibe Café is training individuals in basic skills in food preparation, kitchen preparation, dishwashing, bussing and, if the individual is able, knife skills. The café also focuses strongly on teaching them how to apply for jobs.

Some veteran local chefs volunteer to assist in the training.

After graduating from the training course, the disabled person can go off to work at area restaurants or other places in the food-service industry, Larcen said.

Seven students graduated from a course a few weeks ago, and two have landed jobs so far. Two who attended the first training class last year now work at local hotels. A third training class begins this week.

Larcen decided to make the restaurant a private venture, enlisting the help of area businesses to raise the seed money. He said businesses were more than willing assist in the effort.

"When people try to give my son and me credit for the restaurant, I tell them yes, we came up with the idea," he said. "I have to shift the credit back over to the Richmond community because without them we would not be here."

The restaurant relies heavily on discounts or donations. They are keys to survival, Larcen said, because the Positive Vibe Café is a not-for-profit operation.

Sales have fluctuated from week to week, he said. The restaurant doesn't have an advertising budget.

But the Positive Vibe Café has received some national attention. A columnist for The Wall Street Journal's editorial page wrote about it. And the restaurant was featured Friday on CBS' "The Early Show."

"Being involved in the daily hassles of the restaurant, I sometimes forgot how much this opportunity means to my employees," Larcen said.

But looking at where Young was and where he is now puts things in perspective for Larcen.

"This job is everything for him. He often tells me it's the reason he puts clothes on every morning," Larcen said.

Young agrees.

"This job has made me want to follow my dreams, which is to be a singer," he said. "So when people ask me how to find the restaurant, I tell them to look for the place with the golden aurora around it, because that's just how positive this place is."

His disability is a key part of the business *Paralysis is perspective as he helps clients adapt technology*

BY JUAN ANTONIO LIZAMA
TIMES-DISPATCH STAFF WRITER

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A pier-diving accident 33 years ago in the James River in Newport News left Sean Stapleford paralyzed from the neck down.

It happened on the last day of classes in his senior year of high school. The accident shattered his dream of going into the medical field and possibly becoming a doctor.

Once Stapleford had coped with denial and anger and had gone through physical rehabilitation, he set a goal of learning to do things without an able body, he said.

He went through a basic computer skills course in 1973 and then continued to teach himself.

Stapleford, 49, now works as a Web-site tester for TecAccess, a Hanover County-based company that provides services in information technology and Web-site accessibility for disabled people. The company's clients are businesses and government agencies that need to comply with federal disabilities laws.

TecAccess has 46 full-time and part-time employees, including its owners. Forty-two are in the U.S., with one each in the United Kingdom, France, Australia and India.

Most employees have cognitive, physical or mental disabilities, said Debra Ruh, who founded the company about five years ago. It is just starting to become profitable, she said. TecAccess employees who work from home because of their disabilities -- Stapleford is one of them -- have proved they are capable of quality work, she added.

After his accident, it became evident to Stapleford that his employment opportunities would be limited, he said. In 1991, he moved to The Virginia Home, a nursing and therapeutic facility near Byrd Park for people with irreversible disabilities.

For a while, he worked conducting phone surveys for the Virginia Commonwealth University political-science department. But after sitting four hours at work, he would return to The Virginia Home and have to wait for an aide to put him to bed, he said. This put his health in danger, and he had to stop working, he said.

Through his VCU connection, Stapleford's self-taught computer skills came to the attention of Ruh, who saw his disability as an asset and hired him.

Stapleford, who has an insatiable curiosity about what makes things operate, now works from his bed. He is limited to earning about \$300 a month because anything more than that amount goes to the federal government, he said.

On a table beside his bed sits a microphone to control the voice-activated television mounted on the wall of his room, a television control and a telephone. A mouth stick allows him to work the computer.

Lifting his head, he grips the stick with his teeth and begins operating a flat-panel computer mounted on a hospital-type table over his bed. He has learned to type and navigate the Web using shortcuts and the arrow keys.

Stapleford tests, for example, whether a disabled person who accesses a retail Web site can purchase everything an able person can. In the case of a blind person, the Web site would need voice-activated text.

For a site to be accessible, it needs to be in a logical order, he said. If a blind person puts a mouse pointer over an icon and the voice-activated software only says, "Click here," it's not helpful, he said.

"Click here and what?" he asked. "If software developers added 'Click here and download,' that's making technology more accessible," he said.

"There's a little translation here and there that needs to be done," he said. "If you start from scratch and you incorporate those changes, it would be very easy."

Stapleford, who talks incessantly and smiles a lot, recently worked with Canon Inc. and wrote 13 pages of suggestions on how to make a copier more accessible, he said.

Stapleford said he appreciates the job because it challenges him and helps people.

"TecAccess gives me the chance not only to earn money but also contribute to something useful that wouldn't endanger my health," he said.

"TecAccess has realized that we can work like office people and we have a unique perspective."

Stapleford's teleworker colleague, Edward Ziegler, 43, was in a car accident in 1982 that left him in a coma for two months and caused permanent brain damage. The injury makes it hard for him to remember things and slows his speech and thought process, he said.

Ziegler, who lives in western Henrico County, worked as a phone operator at a Domino's pizza for a while but couldn't maintain the job. He later tried to start his own landscaping business, but that didn't work out, either. Then a second work-related accident worsened his brain condition and hurt his back. He has limited movement in the right side of his body.

TecAccess allows him to work around his condition, Ziegler said. It is not a 9 to 5 job, he said, so sometimes he can be working at 5 in the morning.

"I have not been able to find another employer that would be as flexible as Debra is," he said of Ruh. "I'm very thankful to work with a company that's making an effort to work with people with disabilities."

Ruh found the inspiration to start the company when she realized that employment opportunities would be bleak for her daughter, Sara, now 18, who has Down syndrome. Her goal was to start a for-profit business and to hire mostly people with disabilities.

"I feel it makes good business sense," she said. "We find that they're very stable employees, and they give a great product, and they do it with this great attitude."

People with disabilities do not get sick any more often than most able employees, Ruh said.

"You get very loyal, very able individuals," she said.

Rich Belyea, TecAccess' chief executive officer, said the company tests potential employees' abilities, trains them once they are hired and starts them on small projects.

"As they are successful, they can move up and do more work," he said.

Most employees with disabilities want to succeed, but some do not have the right attitude and have been fired, Belyea said.

"Sometimes people with disabilities are raised in a sheltered environment," he said. "But they develop a tendency to rely on someone else. In order for some individuals with disabilities to be successful in life -- for anyone to succeed in life -- they need to be responsible and do the best they can to meet deadlines."

TecAccess offers people with disabilities who have the right attitude and skills a chance to build their résumé, Belyea said.

Ruh said consumer-electronics retailer Circuit City Stores Inc. was the company's first major client, and others such as Wachovia Corp. and Canon followed.

"The hard work, determination and the stubbornness paid off," she said. "We're a growing company. We're a profit company."

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