



## COVER STORY

By Jenna Caputo | Photos by Super Source Media

Catching a bus; running to the store; cashing a paycheck; using the library – these are all things many of us take for granted, but for the students in the Shen Adult Transition Program, these activities are a major focus of their day.

Heather Green started the program 15 years ago when she began to receive more and more requests from parents for services for special needs students in the school district. Traditionally, services stop at the age of 18, but students have the opportunity to receive school-based support until age 21. Heather wanted to create a program that would address the needs of an 18-21 age group. So in 2003, Shenendehowa, in partnership with local service agencies, applied for a Model Schools Transition Grant through New York State. “The grant included many learning opportunities and partnership through Cornell and SUNY Buffalo,” explains Heather. “We were able to develop curriculum based on the Career Development and Occupational Studies Standards.” They have since developed such a successful program that many other schools often visit so they can replicate the process in their own districts.

The Adult Transition Program is designed to meet the unique needs of these older students with learning difficulties as they are about to transition to their young adult lives. It helps them to not only explore career opportunities, but to also

work on individualized independence goals. To assist students with the first goal of finding a job, this program provides many career exploration opportunities. Students work as interns, or sometimes as paid employees at various local businesses and service agencies. Some students work with the New York State Employment Training Program to receive compensation for their internship hours. They typically intern four days a week, working two to four hours per day. Each student has a job coach available to not only help support the student, but to also ensure maximum learning and to avoid creating unreasonable responsibility for the employer. These job coaches are trained through the Office for People with Developmental Disabilities, focusing on how to teach employability skills and soft skills while fostering independence at the job site.

In the hours the students are not working, they are using the time to practice independence and their individualized goals. “One student may have a goal to obtain a driver’s license, while another student may have a goal to budget her paycheck. Students are motivated to work to be as independent as possible,” explains Heather. “In the classroom, students learn what they need to know to live independently or in the least restrictive environment. This includes personal finance, civic responsibility, cooking, career-readiness skills, travel, shopping and much more.”





the program wanting to learn to work and earn a paycheck. Some of them will graduate to work within the community with supported employment. Some will attend a local college experience program and some will move on to a local “without walls” day program, working with the adult centers like LifeSong, Inc., Saratoga Bridges, Wildwood, Living Resources and the Independent Living Centers.

“Our goal is to assist students and families with all of their choices,” says Heather. “In the past few years, we have had some wonderful success stories. We have a strong relationship with Panera Bread. They currently employ five of our former students and have two current

The students practice taking a CDTA bus, visit the town library to learn how to use the computers, shop at the mall, go to the YMCA – many places just to get used to being outside in the community. They learn to budget their own paychecks for things like groceries, driving lessons and their end of the year school trip. They are also involved in the Bountiful Backpack program at Shen. Working with a job coach in the backpack distribution center on the Shen campus, they master critical skills like warehousing, menu planning, sorting, counting, delivery, customer service and teamwork. The backpacks are filled with breakfast and lunch items as well as a milk & egg card from Stewarts, and then they are sent home with school age students each Friday. The program’s students have been responsible for packing 300 backpacks and counting!

The center currently houses 20 students of varying levels of independence and abilities. All of the students came to

interns. We have also developed a new relationship with Coburg Village. One of our students was just hired part time and another student interns at the village.”

Other participating businesses include: Tractor Supply; Smashburger; Peregrin Memory Care; Shen Elementary & Middle Schools, Prime Restaurant; Kidz Corner Daycare; ABC Nursery School; ACE Hardware; McDonalds; Plaza Laundromat; Hannaford; Price Chopper; Spare Time Bowling; Walgreens; Blaze Pizza; Friendly’s; Walmart; Marshalls; Salvation Army and Hoffman’s Car Wash. The local businesses have been very supportive and Heather hopes to keep adding to the list of opportunities for her students. They are currently trying to obtain more connections within the big corporations in our area to help the students learn office skills as well, but have found this to be a frustrating process since many of these

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companies can't take on interns without the approval from their corporate leadership.

However, the program continues to grow with the tremendous support they have received both from the school and community. As the program blossomed over the years, Kristi Drinkwater joined the team as a part-time instructor as well and has established a work program within the high school for juniors and seniors. Ten years ago, they moved offsite, and this year they will move again to a new location in Clifton Park Center.

Heather says the Shenendehowa Administration has been wonderfully supportive of the program and all its components from the beginning, taking care of the cost of transportation, job coaching and space. This continuous support has allowed students to not only explore their skills, but to find out what excites them. Current student, J Cadrette, was able to do this when he began interning for Shen's Public Information Office, covering Shen news and sports through tweets and blogging. "When I got the job, I was excited," says J. "I feel like I am starting something great for people after me."

Each year the students also prepare for field trips, especially for their big trip to Washington, DC. They work together to plan the trip, picking the sites they want to see and learning why these sites are significant. They also prepare their trip budget, transportation and they work with maps as well as the other responsibilities included with planning a big trip.

The program has been an outstanding success. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, nationally, only 20.78% of working age people with disabilities were in the labor force, with only 19% of them actually working (*BLS Employment Situation, Table A-6, December 2018*). However, Shen's students have different statistics. "In the 15 years we have collected data, the students exiting our program average 73% employment rate at graduation and 68% employment rate two years after graduation," says Heather.

They often share their resources and documents with other local school systems so those districts can implement a similar program as well, helping all the students in the Capital Region with learning difficulties as they transition into the workforce. Businesses are benefitting as much as the students; Heather



has seen it every day. "People with different abilities can prove to be the hardest working and most loyal employees," she says.

*If you are interested in volunteering with the students to help with the backpacks, or if you have a business and would like to participate with the intern program, contact Heather or Kristi at [greeheat@shenet.org](mailto:greeheat@shenet.org) or [drinkris@shenet.org](mailto:drinkris@shenet.org).* ■

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