

# BREAKING GROUND



## Meet the Students of **NEXT STEP** at Vanderbilt



[ 10 ] PARTNERS 16TH ANNUAL REUNION CONFERENCE



[ 14 ] THE *BREAKING GROUND* EMPLOYMENT SERIES PART IV



[ 18 ] TENNESSEE SPOTLIGHT

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Cover Photo by Tony Maupin

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# Meet the Students of NEXT STEP at Vanderbilt

BY COURTNEY TAYLOR

Next Step at Vanderbilt is a two-year non-degree college program for 18- to 26-year-old students with intellectual disabilities. It is the first program of its kind in Tennessee. Next Step promotes the idea that higher education can be an opportunity for all students to gain greater self-awareness, and that it can provide access to social networks, employment and independence. This initiative is a project of the Vanderbilt Kennedy Center and the Tennessee Council on Developmental Disabilities.

Please join us as we welcome to the Vanderbilt Campus the students who began the Next Step program in January, 2010. Read on to learn their perspectives on college life so far.



**HALLIE BEARDEN** is 21 years old and is a graduate of Riverdale High School.

**Why Hallie applied to Next Step**

"I want to learn to live more independently. I would like to have a good job, an apartment and a dog of my own. Plus meet friends with mutual challenges."

**What the college experience has been like**

"I am so happy to be in program Next Step. I am glad to have friends with me. I like my class because it's fun."

*Hallie would like to work in an office doing data entry after the program at Vanderbilt. She is an intern with Tennessee Disability Pathfinder seeking to gain some skills towards her goal.*



**SEAN FAULKNER** is 22 years old and is a graduate of Madison High School.

**Why Sean applied to Next Step**

"I would like to have a chance to take classes and meet young people in my own age group."

**What has been challenging about the college experience**

"The most challenging part about being at Vanderbilt is knowing the names of different places. The second most challenging thing was getting to know the names of the people in my classes. The third most challenging but certainly not least is doing class assignments."

*Sean loves music and has played the keyboard for 10 years. After Next Step, he hopes to work at a music retail store as a sales person. Sean's internship is working at the Vanderbilt Bookstore.*



**JEANNE GAVIGAN** is 20 years old and is a graduate of Pope John Paul II High School.

**Why Jeanne applied to Next Step**

"Vanderbilt is a good school. I am excited to go there. I am proud."

**What the college experience has been like**

"Being a part of college makes me very happy. It is great being in the classes and learning. I feel so great when I am here with my friends."

*Jeanne's career goal is to work for a theatre company in the area of set design, costume design or make-up. In line with this, she is an intern with the Vanderbilt University Theatre Department.*



**EDWARD NESBITT** is 24 years old and is a graduate of Abintra Montessori School.

**Why Edward applied to Next Step**

"I want to have a college experience like my sisters have. I've always dreamed of going to college."

**What has been enjoyable about the college experience**

"I enjoy the college experience because I always wanted to major in something so I can make progress so I can make a living for myself, having a job and I can do that in college. I enjoy college because I am making progress in school and with friends, and I am learning how to be an independent young adult and become educated."

*Edward hopes to own his own apartment, drive a nice car and take vacations to Europe. He hopes to be an asset to the company he works for after Vanderbilt. His internship is with Medical Center Development and Alumni Relations.*



**ELIZABETH STORY** is 22 years old and is a graduate of Nashville Christian School.

**Why Elizabeth applied to Next Step**

"I want to meet new friends and get experience doing things on my own."

**What the college experience has been like**

"Being a part of the Next Step program is really fun because we get to have a college experience. I really enjoy going to my college class every Thursday. I think the thing that has been the most challenging is finding my way around, but it is getting easier now."

*After Vanderbilt, Elizabeth plans to seek employment working with children. She is interning at the Susan Gray School.*



**ANDREW VAN CLEAVE** is 22 year old and is a graduate of Benton Hall Academy.

**Why Andrew applied to Next Step:** "I want help with life skills to make them better than they are now, and I would get to learn more."

**What has been enjoyable about the college experience:** "One of the things I really enjoy is my criminology class. I like learning about the crime rate and organized crime in the time of the Baby Boomers. I have fun at the Hustler newspaper when I do box score and answer questions about different players."

*Andrew has aspirations of working in the police field or possibly in the world of sports after Vanderbilt. He is an intern with the Student Media Newsroom.*

*Courtney Taylor is associate director of Communications and Dissemination at the Vanderbilt Kennedy Center.*

**For more information on Next Step at Vanderbilt, please contact Tammy Day at [nextstep@vanderbilt.edu](mailto:nextstep@vanderbilt.edu), 615-343-0822 or visit [www.nextstep.vanderbilt.edu](http://www.nextstep.vanderbilt.edu).**

# PARTNERS GRADUATE ASKS INDIVIDUALS AND THE COMMUNITY TO ACCEPT RESPONSIBILITY

BY ANTHONY SLEDGE

How long must society continue to punish those who have paid their debt to society? This question may get some mixed answers, depending on who answers the question and whether or not they have compassion in their hearts.

I'm talking about those formerly incarcerated individuals who want to be responsible, productive working individuals contributing back to society. These are some of the same people that you and I know; they are not bad persons but they have made bad choices, which resulted in them being incarcerated. Additionally, some of these individuals may have acquired disabilities before or during their incarceration.

This is a passion close to my heart. That's why I recently formed a non-profit organization named "Accepting Responsibility, Inc." This organization's mission is to assist formerly incarcerated individuals in the reconciliation of becoming productive citizens through community support from holistic, therapeutic and social services. The organization has accepted the challenge of making a difference by recognizing that this is a community problem and it is not going away anytime soon.

First, the individual must accept responsibility and embrace their wrong criminal acts. We know that there are individuals who are being imprisoned unjustly, but not everyone is innocent. We are devoted to helping by empowering these individuals and are dedicated to removing the stigma of having been incarcerated. We must teach and engage them to be responsible and accountable.

We also are striving to open a Re-entry facility to provide housing and other support services to these individuals to assist them in making a successful transition back into society.



Photo by Dorothy Wagstaff

I am confident that as we continue to embrace our cause and mission, we will help break the stereotypical view of what formerly incarcerated individuals look like and the ways in which they are negatively viewed.

I have been working at The Memphis Center for Independent Living for about two years and I won The Arc of the Mid-South Professional of the Year Award for 2009. I recently was appointed by the Governor to serve on the Statewide Independent Living Council. I am so very privileged to serve in this capacity.

But it is only because someone thought enough to give me a chance and saw the greater good and talents in me.

For more information about Accepting Responsibility, Inc., please contact Anthony Sledge at 901-461-4883, or adsledge@aol.com.

*Anthony Sledge is a graduate of the 2008-09 Partners in Policymaking™ Leadership Institute.*

## SAVE THE DATE!



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or call The Arc of Tennessee

at 615-248-5878, or 800-835-7077



# Q&A *with* CARRIE HOBBS GUIDEN

*Recently, Breaking Ground posed some questions to Carrie Hobbs Guiden, the new executive director of The Arc of Tennessee. Breaking Ground would like to thank Ms. Guiden for her thorough and candid responses.*

**BG: What inspired you to accept the position of executive director at The Arc of Tennessee?**

**CHG:** I had worked for a chapter of The Arc for over 14 years of my professional career and remained involved with the organization during the short periods of time that I did not work for The Arc. I believe strongly in The Arc's mission and I like that it has a national, state and local presence. It has been largely responsible for many of the advances that individuals take for granted today, such as the passage of IDEA (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act), the ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act) and other critical pieces of legislation that have had a profound impact on the lives of individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

When the executive director position in Tennessee was brought to my attention, I was working for a private, for-profit service provider. Though I enjoyed my job, at the end of the day it was more about profit than people. Though I was learning a great deal and I liked my co-workers, I knew it was not an organization I wanted to be at long term. The Arc of Tennessee position offered me the chance to work for a chapter of The Arc again and to be able to put the focus where it belongs—on improving the quality of life for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities and their families. The fact that The Arc of Tennessee had such a great reputation and that the position was in such a great city were added benefits.

**BG: Now that you've had a little time to settle in, how does the state of services for persons with disabilities in Tennessee compare to other states where you've lived or worked?**

**CHG:** This is a difficult question to answer because I run the risk of being the "outsider" who comes into a new state and annoys folks by saying, "Well, in (insert any state), we did it this way." Please keep in mind that no matter what I say, every state has its good and bad points. No state is perfect, though there are a couple that like to think they are.

The Tennessee model of services for individuals with intellectual disabilities appears to be shifting more toward a medical model, which contrasts greatly with what is considered "best practice" in the field—namely person centered services, individualized budgets, competitive employment, community based day services, and choice and control in the hands of the person served. Though Tennessee does

offer many creative options for individuals, such as self-directed services, microboards and an aggressive "employment first" policy, they are often overshadowed by the regulatory guidelines that focus on medical necessity rather than quality of life. In fact, not many states offer service recipients the option to self-direct—to be able to hire and manage their own staff.

Tennessee is not the only state constrained by budgetary limitations, yet other state service systems appear to strike a balance between the budget constraints and service delivery that keeps the focus on the individual. Tennessee *should* be in a better situation than other states to accomplish this task because they do have such unique options that often aren't available to people in other states (such as self-directed services), yet the medical model seems to be gaining traction. In fact, individuals who self-direct services typically use less than their entire budget and report higher levels of satisfaction in their services.

The Tennessee model of services appears to be somewhat paternalistic in that the focus appears to be on "care" rather than helping individuals develop skills and have experiences that lead to greater self-sufficiency and community inclusion. My experience in other states is that services are geared to help individuals increase their independence to whatever level they are capable—developing new skills and improving quality of life are at the heart of the entire system.

It may also be that when services are scaled down to a bare minimum, that health and safety ("care") are all that can be considered, but those are hardly the only things that services to individuals with disabilities are intended to accomplish. When the focus is no longer on developing skills and improving quality of life, the system becomes locked into a level of service that is difficult to maintain. If individuals learn new skills and improve in other areas of their lives, the level of service can often be scaled back without harming that person's progress and the system has saved money in the process.

It appears that the Division of Intellectual Disabilities Services (DIDS) has worked hard to create forums for individuals receiving services, family members, providers and advocacy groups to voice their concerns, make suggestions and increase awareness. While the forum is there, the process appears flawed. Too often it seems that policies, guidelines, etc. have already been written or determined at some level and then are "made public". But by that time it is really too late to make any significant

changes. There seems to be a strong reluctance to share anything in draft form with individuals served, families, advocacy agencies and providers prior to it being processed through multiple government departments/agencies, and by the time it reaches the rest of the stakeholders for input it is really a meaningless conversation.

In a state that has impressed me with the number of truly dedicated individuals across the spectrum—advocacy, service providers and state employees—it seems that there should be a greater level of trust and more true collaboration occurring.

**BG: Are there specific challenges, in regard to those services, that you and The Arc hope to address?**

**CHG:** Over the years, The Arc of Tennessee has played an active role in trying to shape the service delivery system for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities. The challenges mentioned above are addressed in various ways. Most recently, The Arc of Tennessee Board members were very involved with a group of other stakeholders in writing a “White Paper” that details a vision for the future of services in Tennessee for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities. The purpose of this paper is to educate gubernatorial candidates and legislators about the service delivery system and how it could be improved. In addition, The Arc is actively involved in a variety of forums where we continue to voice our concerns and offer solutions to the challenges of the service delivery system in Tennessee.

**BG: We were of course very concerned that the State’s Family Support Program was going away. What do you anticipate the impact would have been on Arc membership in Tennessee?**

**CHG:** Maintaining the Family Support program is very important to The Arc, not only because it affected our membership, but because its loss would affect thousands of individuals and families across the State. During the Governor’s State of the State address, we heard the happy news that the Family Support Program will be funded with reserve funds for two more years. The leadership of Deana Claiborne, William Edington, Norm Tenenbaum and others mobilizing grassroots efforts across the State through the Family Support Council, provider agencies and other avenues clearly demonstrated the impact the family stories had on legislators and the administration. The next step is to ensure that the legislators keep the Family Support program funding in their budget and for us to really begin exploring an alternate way to fund the program in the future.

**BG: Do you anticipate taking The Arc of Tennessee in any new directions under your leadership, or are there any future short- or long-term Arc initiatives/projects that you can tell us about?**

**CHG:** Walter Rogers did a wonderful job of expanding The Arc of Tennessee and its services to people with intellectual and developmental disabilities and their families. My plans are to continue exploring ways to expand, but with a focus on diversifying our funding sources. The Arc of Tennessee also has plans to become more active in fundraising. That will be a long process, but we believe it will be worth the effort.

As for specific initiatives, The Arc of Tennessee is taking steps to expand our “grassroots mobilization” efforts by asking members to commit to various levels of legislative involvement and tracking that information in a database. The long term goal is to have enough information in that database to use for specific legislative action when needed.

On a broader scale, I have a strong interest and background in community employment. I fully expect that The Arc of Tennessee will be working with other stakeholders to improve opportunities for community employment and self-employment for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities. There are so many things that come into play when looking at employment that it isn’t something that can change overnight. Our entire human services system isn’t designed to support work as an outcome. There are many barriers to employment that go beyond the economy and employers not being educated about the abilities of this population.

**BG: Is there anything else you’d like the *Breaking Ground* readership to know about The Arc of Tennessee or about you personally?**

**CHG:** If *Breaking Ground* readership doesn’t know it already, I’d like to share that The Arc of Tennessee has an amazing group of staff and volunteers dedicated to improving the lives of individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities and their families. While none of them has a magic wand to wave and solve everyone’s problems, they impress me daily with their knowledge and skills. I am very lucky to work with such great people.

As for information about me personally, I am a sports fan—Indiana Hoosiers basketball (though I’ll admit that has been tough as of late), White Sox baseball, and Colts football (that Superbowl loss was rough!). I am extremely fond of dark chocolate, okra and mangoes (though not all at the same time). I love to cook (and to eat). I enjoy vacations where I can walk around to see all the sights.

I am adopted, an only child and have no children. I have a wonderful husband who is my constant support. I try very hard to be a bridge builder and a team player. I value honesty and directness. And most importantly, I’ve been really looking forward to Spring!

# INCREASING RECREATIONAL ACCESS FOR ATHLETES IN WEST TENNESSEE

BY MICHAEL RICHERSON

In the Spring of 2009, Michael Richerson founded the Special Needs Baseball Foundation (SNBF). Mr. Richerson sensed a void for athletes with disabilities, especially children, to participate in sports in West Tennessee. In a matter of weeks, a baseball league was formed that catered to these under-served athletes.

The overarching mission of the SNBF is to provide support and opportunities for individuals with disabilities and their families through baseball. Across all walks of life, baseball is more than simply a game played between two teams for nine innings. It is an experience for everyone, athletes, families and casual fans alike. The SNBF hopes to not only provide athletic opportunities, but also an atmosphere that encourages camaraderie amongst families, friends and athletes partaking in the action.

Athletes with disabilities from 4-15 years of age now have the opportunity to play organized baseball without some of the barriers that would confront these athletes in a typical sports setting. No one sits on the bench or strikes out in this league. Everyone fields, throws, hits and rounds the bases with as much or as little support as necessary. Coaches and volunteer teammates provide on-field assistance.

Many individuals participated in helping out the children this year. High school and college baseball teams, family members and volunteer groups donated time and hard work to make the program possible, which the kids greatly enjoyed.

This past year, an average of 55 kids played in each of the Spring and Fall league games. All games were played at Tobe Bailey Field located in Jackson, Tennessee. Families drove in from as far as Dyersburg, Selmer, Alamo and Henderson to have their children participate in the baseball league. Parents



Photo by Mary Kay Hylkema

and children showed up to the games with smiles and an eagerness to play. The Spring season concluded with awards to the players, who took the field as the Field of Dreams team with the West Tennessee Diamond Jaxx, the AA Affiliate of the Seattle Mariners. The Fall season concluded with an awards ceremony with a Halloween theme, complete with the players dressed in their costumes, which added to the unique atmosphere and excitement for the players.

The new Spring season kicks off on April 22, 2010, welcoming an additional new age group of athletes, as many high school age kids were left out of the original program. Now, athletes ages 16-30 will also have the opportunity to play in the SNBF. Mr. Richerson's dream is to provide an opportunity for any and every person who desires to be able to play organized baseball in West Tennessee.

As part of this dream, Mr. Richerson and his team of volunteers are in the process of raising money to build a half million-dollar synthetic rubber baseball field. They have received a generous donation from the City

of Jackson, including an acre of property within the West Tennessee Healthcare Sportsplex. The Sportsplex is currently made up of 17 baseball and softball fields and the goal is for the SNBF to have its own field. Groundbreaking for the new field is scheduled for October, 2010.

Mr. Richerson would like to expand the foundation and branch out to other cities and demographics. With the success of the third season, SNBF continues to expand, giving more athletes an equal opportunity to play, learn, grow and succeed in life.

The Special Needs Baseball Foundation is a nonprofit organization, under the West Tennessee Healthcare Foundation, supported by the generosity of private donations.

*Michael Richerson is president and founder of the Special Needs Baseball Foundation. Mr. Richerson is active in the West Tennessee Healthcare Foundation, serves on the Ayers Children's Medical Center Board, is an advocate for Better County Schools and a member of Jackson Roadrunners.*

# IN SUPPORT OF FAMILY SUPPORT

BY DONNA LANKFORD

When I heard the news that the Division of Intellectual Disabilities Services might not fund the Family Support Program for the upcoming fiscal year, it was devastating to me. Without the support of this program my life would be thrown into turmoil, not unlike thousands of other citizens across this State.

I was born three months premature and weighed less than two pounds. As a result, I have cerebral palsy. I am now 46 years old and I rely on my mother to provide all my personal care. I cannot move without assistance and use an electric wheelchair for mobility.

Funding from this program helped pay for modifications to our bathroom, including a roll-in shower to make it more accommodating for my mother to assist me.

My mother drives a school bus during the day, so I rely on a neighbor to transport me to Goodwill Industries, where I have been a receptionist for 18 years. The Family Support program pays my neighbor to transport



Photo by Erin Starnes

me to work. I take pride in contributing to my State as a tax paying citizen, and I have the opportunity to make my community better by assisting others in need.

The small amount of assistance that I receive from this program has made a tremendous difference in my quality of life, assisting me with things that most people take for granted. This is the only program that will provide the assistance that I need to continue to be a productive citizen.

*Parts of this article first appeared in The Advocate, the newsletter of The Arc of Washington County.*

**TENNESSEE FAMILY SUPPORT ALLIANCE** is a grassroots organization comprised of citizens who care about the Tennessee Family Support Program, and who support it as a necessary component of Tennessee's service array for families who have loved ones with disabilities. We maintain a list of individuals who have volunteered to serve as representatives of various groups.

We applaud and thank Governor Bredesen for including continued funding for the Family Support Program in his budget for the next two fiscal years. We also thank all the families, individuals and legislators who have spoken and acted on behalf of this important program.

Membership in the Tennessee Family Support Alliance is open to everyone. The purpose is to voice endorsement of one of Tennessee's most valued and effective statewide programs

serving persons of all ages with a variety of severe disabilities, and providing essential support to their families and caregivers.

We actively solicit comments and discussion from the general public, as well as communications from individuals and families who use the program.

Visit [www.tnfamilysupport.org](http://www.tnfamilysupport.org) for more information or to contact the Alliance.

## TENNESSEE PARTNERS IN POLICYMAKING



A free leadership and advocacy training for adults with disabilities and family members.

Seven weekend sessions  
**September 2010 - April 2011**

For an application, or more information, please contact Ned Andrew Solomon at 615.532.6556, or [ned.solomon@tn.gov](mailto:ned.solomon@tn.gov)

**APPLICATION DEADLINE:** April 30, 2010



# PARTNERS 16th ANNUAL REUNION CONFERENCE

A record crowd gathered at the 16th Annual Partners in Policymaking Reunion Conference to hear national keynote speakers Tom Pomeranz and Marc Elliott, as well as breakout presentations on including kids with disabilities in outside-of-school programs, healthcare and education transition issues for high school aged students, yoga and other recreational activities for persons with disabilities, the Next Step college program for students with intellectual disabilities and much more.

A highlight was a Friday evening concert performance by 17-year-old Matt Savage, a musician/composer with autism who has seven CDs under his belt, and numerous national TV appearances.

Thanks to Partners grad Christy Wells-Reece for chronicling the event in pictures!



# FOLLOWING A DREAM



BY GINGER BALL

We all have dreams and ideas that we aspire to, but do we all follow them? The answer is probably no. Many of us find a bucket full of reasons (or excuses) why we can't do what we dream of doing.

Well that's not the case for a young woman in Parrottsville, Tennessee. She had a dream to be a cake decorator. So instead of using her disability as an excuse, she chose to work hard to overcome obstacles and make her dream come true.

Using funds allotted for people on the Division of Intellectual Disabilities Services Waiting List called Consumer Directed Supports, Kimberly Gregg chose to seek out vocational training in cake decorating. She has taken several classes and attended numerous conventions involving various techniques for making beautiful edible cake decorations for a variety of occasions.

Over the past couple of years, Ms. Gregg has perfected her craft by

practicing and being involved in more classes to stay on top of what is up and coming in the cake decorating business.

Has all of this hard work paid off? You be the judge. Ms. Gregg is currently an apprentice cake decorator. She stays very busy working with her mother and sister-in-law in a cake decorating business, which is a supportive environment that meets her needs to become the best that she can be. In October 2008, her mother, who owns the business, changed its name to "Kimmie's Yummies". The business has created over 300 specialty cakes since that time, and Ms. Gregg has won the People's Choice award for best decorator in Newport/Parrottsville twice.

The moral of this story: **Don't let anything stand in the way of your dreams.**

To see some of this company's creative cakes, check out [kimmiesyummies.com](http://kimmiesyummies.com).

*Ginger Ball is a case manager with the Division of Intellectual Disabilities Services. She has worked in the field of developmental disabilities, in several different capacities, for over 26 years.*

## PEER BUDDY PROGRAMS FOR SUCCESSFUL SECONDARY SCHOOL INCLUSION

By Carolyn Hughes and Erik W. Carter • Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co. • 199 pages



BOOK REVIEW BY LESLIE HARTMAN

Growing up I was very fortunate in having a "typical" childhood. I had friends my age who I hung out with, I had extracurricular activities that filled my calendar, school to attend and homework assignments to complete. I did all of these despite having cerebral palsy.

From day one, I was mainstreamed into the regular school curriculum. This is not always the case for all people with disabilities. The person's capabilities and the flexibility and willingness of a particular school's administration can greatly influence how much time a student spends in a general education setting. And due to the stress and demands that state and federal laws put on education, such as No Child Left Behind, the best teachers strive to find a way to uphold the laws and regulations while making sure all the students are grasping the necessary concepts.

*Peer Buddy Programs for Successful Secondary School Inclusion* by Carolyn Hughes and Erik W. Carter gives school educators and parents a way to do just that. Drs. Hughes and Carter's book studies the Peer Buddy Program in schools and gives readers a one-stop source on how to implement this kind of initiative from the start. The Peer Buddy Program sets out to achieve the goal of promoting friendships and a mutual learning experience for students with and without disabilities. The Peer Buddy program can be done in any number of ways—it all depends on the needs and desires of a particular school community.

So what is a Peer Buddy? A Peer Buddy is a responsible student without a disability who works with a student with a disability. The Peer Buddy and his or her partner accompany each other to classes or activities both inside and outside of school, such as a job site where the partner is employed or seeking employment.

According to the authors, when first implementing a Peer Buddy Program it is best to have the whole school involved in some capacity. Depending on the school and its needs, the program may start out in a resource classroom with a few students and then expand as circumstances allow. It should also be decided if the program will be considered part of the school's curricula or strictly a volunteer initiative. Drs. Hughes and Carter also suggest that an orientation take place so the Peer Buddies know what to expect from their involvement. Regular follow-up meetings should be scheduled so that the Peer Buddies and partners are given adequate resources and supports to ensure success throughout the school year.

As a helpful guide, the authors present every possible scenario when trying to get a Peer Buddy Program off the ground. The book gives basic instructions on how to set up the program, next steps once the program gets going, as well as how to keep it running smoothly and what educators may want to do if they encounter obstacles along the way. The book also provides numerous examples, feedback and templates to help illustrate these ideas.

*Leslie Hartman is a senior at Lee University in Cleveland, Tennessee, and is an intern with the Council on Developmental Disabilities.*

# THE VOLUNTEER ADVOCACY PROJECT

BY MEGHAN BURKE

Jenny has a son named Kevin with autism. Kevin is a 3rd grader at the local public school. Lately, Kevin has needed more support at school. He needs prompting to stay on task, individualized attention for academic activities and assistance during transition times. In the past, Kevin has been in a classroom with a regular education teacher and a classroom aide. This year, however, he is in a regular classroom without a classroom aide. Jenny feels that Kevin needs a one-on-one educational assistant. The school disagrees, and feels that Kevin should be moved to a more restrictive setting (self-contained classroom) for extra support.

Jenny is getting frustrated. She is struggling with communicating effectively with the school and retaining appropriate services for Kevin. In the meantime, Kevin is falling further behind academically, socially and functionally. Jenny contacted her local chapter of The Arc for help and was linked with an advocate.

Sara, a graduate of the Volunteer Advocacy Project, met with Jenny at a coffee shop. Sara listened to Jenny's story, and learned about Kevin's strengths and weaknesses, along with what has been successful at school and what continue to be struggles for him. Sara and Jenny wrote a letter to the school requesting an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) meeting. Prior to going to the meeting, Sara helped Jenny write a parent input statement describing Kevin's difficulties in the classroom and explaining why he needs an educational assistant. In writing it, Sara made sure that the letter was very practical, focusing on how we know Kevin is struggling and why extra supports are needed in the least restrictive environment.

Sara attended the IEP meeting with Jenny. Jenny read her letter aloud to the IEP team and the team agreed that Kevin is struggling. They expressed concern that having an educational assistant would further stigmatize Kevin with his peers and

inhibit social interactions. To address this issue, Sara suggested that they write a statement in the IEP that the educational assistant will stand five to ten feet away from Kevin and that the aide will prompt him every five minutes to monitor his progress. They discussed eventually teaching Kevin a system to self-identify when he needs help and, subsequently, signal to the educational assistant. They wrote all of this into the IEP and Kevin immediately started to do better in school.

Navigating the special education process can be a difficult, tedious and emotionally charged process for many families of children with disabilities. Attending a school meeting to discuss needed services for their children, parents often have difficulty retaining appropriate educational supports. Special education regulations are constantly changing at the national, state and local levels, and trying to keep up with such changes, let alone understand how such changes affect actual service delivery, can be a full-time challenge. In tandem with understanding policy changes, the emotional involvement of advocating for one's child adds more difficulty to securing services.

The Volunteer Advocacy Project exists to help families of children with disabilities. The purpose of the advocate is to provide instrumental (understanding the special education system) and affective (giving emotional strength) support to families of students with disabilities.

For the Fall 2009 training, participants attended five Friday and five Saturday sessions to learn about special education policy and advocacy skills. Speakers were from various agencies, including faculty at Vanderbilt University, the Disability Law and Advocacy Center, The Arc of Tennessee and The Arc of Davidson County. Topics included research-based interventions, extended school year services, eligibility and individualized education plans, disability categories and testing, and non-adversarial advocacy techniques. The training was held at



the Vanderbilt Kennedy Center with distance sites at East Tennessee State University (Johnson City), The Boling Center (Memphis), and West Tennessee Healthcare (Jackson). Using video-conferencing technology, we now have advocates across the State able to provide instrumental and affective support for families of students with disabilities.

With the tremendous help of The Arc of the Mid-South, The Arc of Davidson County, and STEP (Support and Training for Exceptional Parents), the new graduates will shadow seasoned advocates at an IEP meeting. Subsequently, each graduate will be linked with four families of students with disabilities. The graduates will work with these families—for free—to ensure that their children receive a free, appropriate public education.

On October 31, 2009, 28 graduates of The Volunteer Advocacy Project joined the 28 past graduates, leading to a grand total of 56 special education advocates across the State of Tennessee. The fourth training of the Project began on January 14, 2010. For those interested in learning more about the training or applying to participate in a future cohort, please contact **Meghan Burke** at **615-585-1420** or **Meghan.m.burke@vanderbilt.edu**.

*Meghan Burke, a doctoral student in Special Education-Low Incidence Disabilities at Vanderbilt University, directs The Volunteer Advocacy Project. She also has a younger brother with Down syndrome.*

# GRUPO PARA PADRES EN ESPAÑOL

BY COURTNEY TAYLOR

Imagine—or recall—how difficult it is for individuals with disabilities and their families as they begin to navigate through the world of disability supports and services. Now imagine beginning to navigate those services with the added difficulty of not being able to speak the language.

The Hispanic Outreach Program aims to provide assistance to Spanish-speaking families in Tennessee who have a family member with a disability. The program was developed and is coordinated by the Vanderbilt Kennedy Center and the Tennessee Council on Developmental Disabilities, with additional support from the Division of Intellectual Disabilities Services.

One activity within the program is the facilitation of a monthly family support group. Started in 2006 and with only five participants, the good news spread and the group now has over 50 members.

“We grew very quickly by word-of-mouth,” said Carolina Meyerson, Hispanic Outreach Program specialist and support group facilitator. “Building personal relationships and establishing a sense of trust is so important in the Hispanic community. A mother would come to the group for the first time and she would like it, so she would bring her husband the next time. The group has become just like one big family.”

A typical support group meeting agenda includes time for families to share experiences, joys and challenges as well as an educational component that connects the families with local agencies. Guest speakers have included representatives from STEP (Support and Training for Exceptional Parents), TEIS (Tennessee Early Intervention System), and El Protector, a traffic safety outreach program directed to the Hispanic community and facilitated through the Metropolitan Police Department.

The support group also has a social component. Special family events are planned periodically to encourage participation in local activities.

“Last year, all of the families attended the opening ceremony of Special Olympics Tennessee together,” said Ms. Meyerson. “We also held a Christmas Party where we had over 150 people! We had a raffle and lots of food and drink. Santa was there so the kids could have their pictures taken. It has been really nice to see the group bonding and participating in social activities in the community together.”

The established trust and group bonding have encouraged many of the families to feel more comfortable participating in other Vanderbilt Kennedy Center programs. The Ann and Monroe Carell Jr. Families First Program, a monthly workshop series for parents of young children diagnosed with an autism spectrum disorder, has begun to include an interpreter so that Spanish-speaking families can benefit from the



trainings. Spanish-speaking siblings are beginning to participate in SibSaturdays, a program for siblings who have a brother or a sister with a disability.

“I think it is great that these families are feeling more comfortable and seeing the Vanderbilt Kennedy Center as a safe and welcoming place,” said Cecilia Melo-Romie, statewide Hispanic outreach coordinator for the Division of Intellectual Disabilities Services. “It is difficult when you don’t know the language very well to feel a sense of belonging. The support group and all of the efforts we are putting forth that let them know that their needs are important are paying off. They know we are here to help and that is a very important role for us to play.”

For more information on the activities of the Hispanic Outreach Program’s support group and on Camino Seguro, a Web-based searchable database of disability, mental health and social services providers who have Spanish-speaking staff, contact 615-479-9568, or [cecilia.melo-romie@vanderbilt.edu](mailto:cecilia.melo-romie@vanderbilt.edu)

*Courtney Taylor is associate director of Communications and Dissemination at the Vanderbilt Kennedy Center.*



## THE FUTURE: *Demand-side Approaches to Expand Employment Opportunities for Jobseekers with Disabilities*

BY ROBERT B. NICHOLAS, PhD

Tennessee's planning for expanding employment

opportunities for jobseekers with intellectual disabilities needs to recognize exciting new realities in the nation's workforce system. Many of the nation's leading companies have found people with disabilities, including people with intellectual disabilities, to be a valuable resource to meet their workforce needs. Companies such as Pepsico, Manpower, Walgreens, Lockheed Martin, Microsoft, Dow Chemical, Motorola, Walmart, Sears/K-Mart, Lowes and SunTrust have all adopted the "business case" for employing people with disabilities and have established disability recruitment initiatives.

Kevin Bradley, director of Inclusion and Diversity, McDonalds USA, captured the essence of the business case when he said, "Hiring people with disabilities is not an act of charity; it's a smart move for business." This concept was echoed by Rich Donovan, a former Merrill Lynch executive, who founded Lime Connect. He said the "brand" for people with disabilities is "rooted in medical terms and expressions of pity; it's radioactive." He advocates to "Kill the brand with quality. Get the message out that people with disabilities can and will deliver."

Specific elements of the business case for employing people with disabilities include the following:

- Employees with disabilities have equal or better reliability and retention rates resulting in reduced costs and increased productivity for employers;
- Improved morale and productivity throughout the company;
- Employees with disabilities assist employers to fine tune their products to customers with disabilities;
- Customers prefer to do business with companies that employ people with disabilities;
- Employers must prepare to accommodate and retain experienced and knowledgeable employees who acquire a disability; and
- Labor market projections indicate a shortage of skilled employees in the next decade. Savvy employers are developing recruitment strategies to tap non-traditional sources of labor, including people with disabilities.

The source for these elements is not a disability advocacy organization but rather a project called disabilityworks, established by the Chicagoland Chamber of Commerce.

This emerging recognition by employers of the value of employees with disabilities is fueling a fundamental paradigm shift. Disability service providers need to respond to employers by assisting them to meet their workforce needs. This is known as the "demand-side" approach to

employing people with disabilities, and it will require new strategies and operating procedures by disability service providers and collaboration with state workforce and economic development planning efforts.

The following are vignettes of successful demand-side efforts across the nation that illustrate elements of this paradigm and their implications for disability employment policies in Tennessee. The first three profiles focus on models that specifically targeted increasing the number of people with intellectual disabilities who were employed in the workforce, while the last two profiles highlight strategies used to increase employment for people with a broad range of disabilities, including intellectual disabilities. The key here is that each profile illustrates a model that works to increase employment for people with the most significant disabilities.

### PROFILES OF CHANGE

#### *Walgreens*

Walgreens established a corporate goal of having 30% of the employees at its distribution centers nationwide be people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. A core strategy adopted by Walgreens to achieve this goal is to establish partnerships with local disability service agencies to assist in recruitment, training and supports related to the employees with intellectual and developmental disabilities. The construction of a new Walgreens distribution center in Anderson, South Carolina, provides important lessons on demand-side approaches to employing people with disabilities.

First, in seeking to locate the center, Walgreens sought proposals from state economic development offices that included how the states would assist the company in meeting its disability employment objectives. The company located the distribution in Anderson partly because of the strength of a proposal developed by the Anderson County Special Needs Board and the district vocational rehabilitation office to provide assistance. The economic development office also provided a grant to assist in training people with disabilities for skilled jobs at the center.

Second, the distribution center is staffed with a total of 800 employees. Accordingly, Walgreens was seeking 250 employees with intellectual and developmental disabilities to meet its goals. In order to facilitate a large enough pool of potential employees, the Anderson Special Needs Board and the vocational rehabilitation office developed a partnership with the Special Needs Boards in four adjacent counties as well as with local school systems. An interagency agreement was formed to establish standard recruitment criteria and operating procedures based on Walgreens' needs. The Anderson Special Needs Board serves as the lead for the partnership and coordinates the activities of staff from the

various agencies. It also serves as the contact for Walgreens staff with regard to the initiative.

Third, the jobs at the distribution center are skilled positions. Walgreens retained consultants to work with its employees and staff from the partnership to develop a curriculum to train people with intellectual and developmental disabilities for the needed skills. This curriculum is based on how people with intellectual and developmental disabilities learn and makes extensive use of pictures and symbols. Staff from the partner agencies train jobseekers at a training area on-site at the distribution center. Employees with disabilities must meet the same performance standards as employees who do not have a disability. Likewise, employees with disabilities receive the same salary and benefit package as other employees in the same positions.

The Anderson distribution center opened in 2007. It has 250 employees with intellectual and developmental disabilities, 200 of whom were hired through the partnership. The center is 20% more efficient than existing distribution centers in the Walgreens system. The *Wall Street Journal* said, "Walgreens 'innovative program' is offering jobs to people with mental and physical disabilities of a nature that has frequently deemed them unemployable while saving Walgreens money through automation." Due to Walgreens' success, other companies with distribution center networks are now seeking to replicate this model.

### ***Project SEARCH***

Project SEARCH was developed by Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center (CCHMC) to recruit people with intellectual and developmental disabilities in response to performance issues and high staff turnover in support positions in its emergency department. The hospital developed partnerships with a local technology center, the local board of mental retardation and developmental disabilities, the state office of vocational rehabilitation and the Cincinnati School District to coordinate recruitment, training and access to support services. Erin Riehle, an administrator at the hospital who developed Project SEARCH, said, "Large employers are approached by many agencies representing people with disabilities and disadvantaged job applicants. Businesses have little understanding of who these

agencies are and why so many of them are coming to their workplace. Businesses, especially in the healthcare environment, are focused on security, access to parking and other issues that make it desirable to have less people walking in and out of their facility. They want external partners to facilitate the business conduct and professional functioning of the employer organization and its staff with the people it serves."

Project SEARCH has two components; a high school transition program and an adult employment program. The high school transition program provides full-time internships for students with intellectual and developmental disabilities during their exit year that involve skills training and job experiences at the hospital. Students identify their interests and job preferences during the year. The adult employment program provides graduating students with coordinated supports for job placement, job retention and career advancement.

CCHMC employs more than 80 people placed in jobs through Project SEARCH. Project SEARCH provides CCHMC with an on-going pipeline of dedicated, skilled employees who positively affect the hospital's "bottom line." Based on its success at CCHMC, the Project SEARCH model has been replicated at over 140 sites in the United States and Europe and it has been applied to other workforce sectors. [See sidebar for a description of this model in Tennessee.]

### ***New Bedford Area Chamber of Commerce***

The New Bedford Area Chamber of Commerce in Massachusetts operates the "Supported Employment Network". A part-time Chamber staff person, funded by the state Department of Developmental Services, serves as the single point of contact between a network of local employment service providers and over 250 local employers for the recruitment of employees with intellectual and developmental disabilities. The program also provides employers with a broad range of information and networking opportunities pertaining to the benefits of employing people with disabilities using an "employer to employer" approach.

The involvement of the New Bedford Area Chamber of Commerce is consistent with a growing interest in Chambers nationwide in meeting

CONTINUED ON PAGE 17→

## **TRANSITION FROM SCHOOL TO WORK FOR TENNESSEE STUDENTS WITH INTELLECTUAL DISABILITIES**

BY ROBERT B. NICHOLAS, PhD

### **MODEL PROGRAMS IN TENNESSEE**

There are numerous model programs in Tennessee for the transition of students with intellectual disabilities that illustrate best practices and the possibilities for the future. The following are diverse examples of cutting edge programs in the State.

### ***Project Opportunity***

Project Opportunity is located at Vanderbilt University Medical Center in Nashville. The program is based on the successful Project SEARCH model developed at Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center

and replicated at hospitals throughout the country. The model is now being used in the financial sector and a replication is being developed at the U.S. Department of Labor.

Project Opportunity has two phases. The first is an internship for transitioning students at the Medical Center. Interns receive classroom training on employability skills related to the business environment and individualized skills training at real work sites. Upon completion of this training, the program works to place the students in skilled positions at the hospital.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 19→

As Summer draws near, many families prepare for changes in routines and daily life. Longer, warmer days are filled with family vacations, camps and a variety of recreational activities. For school-age students with disabilities, extended school year, or "ESY" services may also be included. ESY services are provided by the student's Local Education Agency, typically planned at the end of each school year, and may include structured skill building opportunities such as therapies, academic tutoring or Summer camps.

Pathfinder's "Services Database" of statewide resources provides valuable information to assist families with Summer planning, including:

**CHILD CARE PROGRAMS** - Programs that provide substitute parental care for children during some portion of a 24-hour day; agencies that help locate appropriate facilities; voucher information

**CAMPS OR SUMMER PROGRAMS** - Residential or day camp facilities appropriately staffed and equipped to provide opportunities for children who have developmental, emotional or health-related disabilities

**RECREATION & ARTS** - Opportunities for people of all ages to participate in the specific recreational activity, game or sport of their choice; includes recreation therapy

**RESPIRE CARE SERVICES** - Programs that offer short-term care for children and adults to provide a brief period of rest for family members or guardians

**IDEA INFORMATION OR TRAINING PROGRAMS** - Information and Education Act (IDEA) in schools; Individualized Education Plan (IEP) assistance

Pathfinder's "Disability Resources Library" is a wealth of information on statewide and national resources, including Arts & Recreation, Education, Summer Camps and Support for Families.

Looking for a support group? Check out Pathfinder's "Statewide List of Support Groups" located under "Printable Flyers and Materials" on Pathfinder's home page: [www.familypathfinder.org](http://www.familypathfinder.org)

**"CAMINO SEGURO"** is Pathfinder's database of disability, mental health and social service agencies with bilingual Spanish-speaking staff across the State of Tennessee. The mission of Camino Seguro is to increase cultural competency and accessibility to resources for Spanish-speaking individuals by providing a direct link to service providers who speak Spanish. The database is divided into the three Tennessee regions: East, Middle and West. For additional information about Camino Seguro or other Spanish-speaking providers in Tennessee, please call 1-800-640-4636 or e-mail [tnpathfinder@vanderbilt.edu](mailto:tnpathfinder@vanderbilt.edu).

*Angela Bechtel, MSSW, is the information & referral services coordinator with Tennessee Disability Pathfinder.*

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.....  
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employer workforce needs through the employment of people with disabilities. The U.S. Chamber Web site states, “People with disabilities are a source of qualified workers that is frequently overlooked. This pool of workers represents one of the largest groups seeking employment in today’s market—some nine million unemployed Americans with significant disabilities want to work.” In describing the Supported Employment Network, Roy Nascimento, the director of the New Bedford Area Chamber of Commerce said, “We are involved in workforce development initiatives and this fits nicely with our efforts to help employers find qualified workers.”

The New Bedford Supported Employment Network is able to successfully serve business members by matching employers’ needs with an expanded labor pool of prescreened, qualified employees. Since 2005, 740 workers with intellectual and developmental disabilities have been hired through the Network.

**Manpower**

Manpower, Inc. is one of the largest staffing companies in the world. The company has a longstanding policy of recruiting people with disabilities. Manpower’s director of Workforce Development states, “Considering labor and skills shortages we are facing in the United States, we believe our linkages to organizations supporting people with disabilities is a business critical strategy.”

Manpower uses a model called TechReach in its disability recruitment efforts. The TechReach program in Albuquerque, New Mexico, is an example of how Manpower recruited people with disabilities to meet a local business need for skilled employees in electronic assembly. Manpower’s Albuquerque office established a partnership with the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (DVR), the local workforce investment board, the local community college and employers to collaborate on outreach and training for prospective candidates. The administrative entity for the workforce investment board provided funding to the community college for the development of a flexible training curriculum to train and certify people with a broad range of disabilities for electronic assembly positions. DVR handled outreach for candidates for the training program and the workforce investment board provided funding for the training of over 50 people with disabilities. Then DVR paid for the costs of housing and transportation related to the training and Manpower provided prescreening, post screening and job placement supports.

The Albuquerque TechReach program successfully met a local workforce need through the recruitment and training of employees with disabilities. Manpower statistics indicate that 100% of the graduates of TechReach were hired by employers, with a 93% retention rate. Manpower notes that TechReach is an important tool for facilitating employment for people with disabilities that is available to all of its offices worldwide.

**disabilityworks**

disabilityworks is a joint initiative of the Chicagoland Chamber of Commerce, the Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity and the City of Chicago. Its goal is to “increase economic and employment opportunities for people with disabilities while meeting workforce needs throughout the State of Illinois through the development of collaborative partnerships between the private and public sectors.” disabilityworks is an umbrella organization supporting and coordinating

several important disability employment related activities. The first is the Chicagoland Business Leadership Network that provides a forum for business-to-business sharing of information and experiences related to the employment of people with disabilities. The second is the Chicagoland Provider Leadership Network that coordinates the employment activities of 280 disability services organizations and provides access to the employer connections of disabilityworks. The third is the state’s Disability Program Navigators, who, through a grant from the Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity, improve access for people with disabilities to the services of the state’s One Stop Centers and develop collaborative relations with chambers and business groups. The fourth is serving as the single point of contact for a pilot project to recruit, train and support jobseekers with disabilities for positions in 17 Walgreens retail stores in Chicago.

**IMPLICATIONS FOR TENNESSEE**

These profiles from across the country illustrate the value of people with disabilities, including intellectual and developmental disabilities, in meeting employer workforce needs and innovative efforts to provide employers with easy access to jobseekers with disabilities and the supports they might need. The following are implications of these profiles for meeting workforce needs in Tennessee through the employment of people with disabilities.

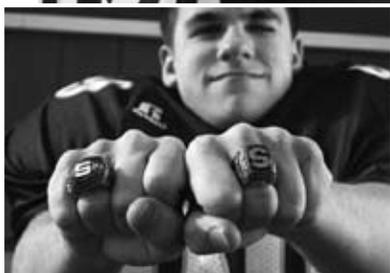
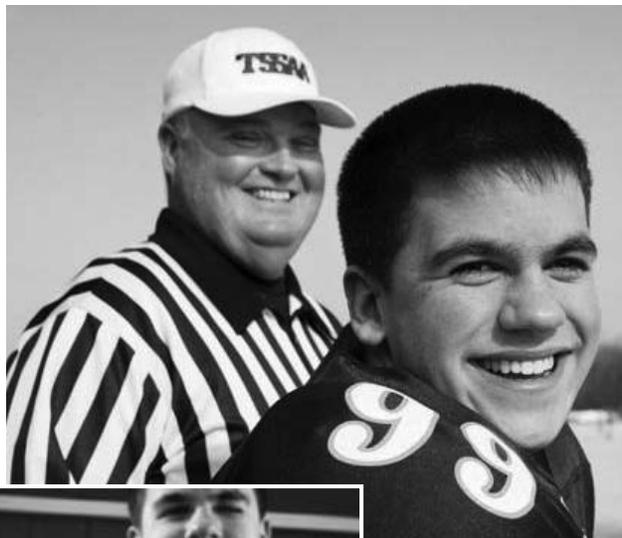
- Jobseekers with disabilities should be included as a labor resource in the State’s economic development and workforce planning efforts;
- Incentives should be provided for employers to recruit and train jobseekers with disabilities to meet their workforce needs;
- Inter-agency collaborations should be developed to facilitate a single point of contact for employers regarding recruitment, training and supports for jobseekers with disabilities;
- Capacity should be developed at Chambers of Commerce to facilitate meeting employer workforce needs through the employment of jobseekers with disabilities;
- Internship opportunities should be developed for jobseekers with disabilities as an option for providing them with the training and experience they need for skilled positions; and
- Training curriculum should be developed and offered at community colleges and technical schools to train jobseekers with disabilities for skilled positions.

**CONCLUSION**

The future is bright for expanding employment opportunities for jobseekers with disabilities, including intellectual and developmental disabilities. The question for policymakers and practitioners is: Will we be able to respond if a company like Walgreens calls and says that it wants to hire 250 people with disabilities?

*Robert B. Nicholas, PhD, is a Senior Visiting Fellow for Disability Research at the John J. Heldrich Center for Workforce Development at Rutgers University. He coordinates the research agenda for the U.S. Department of Labor, Office of Disability Employment Policy funded National Technical Assistance and Research Leadership Center. He also provides technical assistance to the Tennessee Employment Consortium under a grant contract with the Tennessee Council on Developmental Disabilities. He resides in Corryton, Tennessee.*

# TENNESSEE SPOTLIGHT



Youth Leadership Forum (YLF) 2009 graduate, **Cody Noyes**, continues to make the news. Now a high school senior, Mr. Noyes won two state championship rings from

serving as motivational coach for the **Smyrna High School** football team. More recently, Mr. Noyes was voted by his fellow students as **Senior Class King of Hearts** for basketball homecoming—one of the top distinctions a senior boy can receive at the school. He also earned a senior superlative award for Most School Spirit and received a standing ovation at the football banquet.

YLF grad and counselor, **Tabitha Burns**, has enrolled in a community policing program in Smyrna. Police departments across the nation have adopted the “*Community Policing*” philosophy. Locally, the **Smyrna Police Department** has implemented different ways of working more closely with citizens on problem-solving in the community. **The Citizens Police Academy** provides participants with an opportunity to gain a broad perspective of the police profession. The 12-week Academy is designed to give citizens an overview of the department’s functions and procedures, while providing a forum for the exchange of ideas and concerns relating to the community.

Last November, **Jonathon McGee**, son of Partners 2000-01 grad, **Kathy McGee**, received his **Eagle Scout Award** at the **First**



**United Methodist Church** in Maryville, Tennessee. Mr. McGee started in scouting at seven years old in 1995 with the **Tiger Cubs**. He worked his way up to the Boy Scouts, earning the **Arrow of Light** and **World Conservation**

**Awards**. In all, he has earned 33 merit badges, including the **Ad Altare Dei Merit Badge**, the second highest award given by the Catholic Church.

The Board of Directors of **STEP, Inc.** is pleased to announce that Partners 97-98 grad, **Karen Harrison**, has accepted the position of Executive Director of STEP, Inc. Ms. Harrison has worked as a dedicated and respected member of the STEP family since 1994, when she began as a contract district parent trainer, eventually moving into positions of greater responsibility and higher authority, first as East Tennessee Regional Training Coordinator and then Project Coordinator.

**Ruthie-Marie Beckwith, PhD**, executive director of the **Tennessee Microboard Association**, read and signed her new mystery novel, *Seven Days at Oak Valley*, at **Davis Kidd Booksellers** in Nashville on March 2. In the novel, Tony, the protagonist, lives in an institution, has a developmental disability and uses his detective skills to solve crimes.

**Professor of Special Education Carolyn Hughes** has won a \$30,000 grant from the **Organization for Autism Research** to fund a pilot project that will help high school students with autism become more included and involved in their schools and with their peers. The proposal was one of seven selected out of 75 submitted as part of the organization’s eighth annual **Applied Autism Research Competition**.

The pilot project will teach social interaction skills among students with autism spectrum disorder and their peers and promote the inclusion of these students in both academic and non-academic activities throughout their school day and across multiple settings, such as general education classes, physical education classes, the library or cafeteria. Much of the social skills instruction will be led by the students’ peers.

← CONTINUED FROM PAGE 15

Sara Ezell, program coordinator, said that the growth of the interns and the success of the employees who have been hired is inspiring. She noted that a challenge for Project Opportunity is identifying on-going funding to sustain the program. Currently, the project is funded through grants from the Division of Rehabilitation Services (DRS), the Department of Education (DOE), and the Council on Developmental Disabilities. It also receives Federal Stimulus funding from one of its school system partners. These grants are each time-limited. The project also has not had access to funding for supports for job retention for employees with intellectual disabilities due to the Division of Intellectual Disabilities Services (DIDS) waiting list.

### ***Knoxville Seamless Transition Project***

The Knoxville Seamless Transition project is operated jointly by the Cerebral Palsy Center of Knoxville and Workforce Connections in partnership with Knox County Schools, DRS, and DIDS. Students with intellectual disabilities are referred to the program for their exit year of school. The program provides inclusive activities in the community, career exploration, vocational assessments and job placement and has achieved impressive employment outcomes. Seventy percent of program participants have been employed for at least one year.

The program is funded by a creative braiding of funding from Knox County schools, DRS, DIDS and Workforce Connections. This program is challenged, however, by the DIDS waiting list. Only 16% of program graduates receive funding from DIDS for on-going employment supports. The program provides unfunded follow along supports to the remainder to meet its obligations to DRS. The program shows, however, that extensive community experiences and vocational programming can make it possible for a transitioning student with intellectual disabilities to be employed without DIDS supports.

### ***Vanderbilt Postsecondary Education Program***

The Vanderbilt Kennedy Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities began to coordinate a postsecondary education program for students with intellectual disabilities at Vanderbilt University in January, 2010. [See article on page 3.] The program, which is the first of its kind in Tennessee, is funded through a three-year grant from the Tennessee Council on Developmental Disabilities. Students will “take a mixture of undergraduate, life skills, and technical courses, as well as take part in campus extracurricular activities with Vanderbilt undergraduates.” Elise McMillan, co-director of the University Center on Excellence in Developmental Disabilities at the Vanderbilt Kennedy Center, said that students in the program will have the opportunity to enroll in classes at the Tennessee Technology Center in Nashville. This option has not been available to people with intellectual disabilities to date. She said that the focus of the program is to provide people with knowledge and experiences, including internships that will lead to employment in well paying jobs. At the completion of the two-year program, students will

receive a certificate, and Ms. McMillan hopes that ultimately there will be a national certification from such programs.

### **CONCLUSION**

The school to work transition process for students with intellectual disabilities in Tennessee has many strengths and there are impressive model programs in the State that present new possibilities as a point of reference for progress. DOE and its partners, DRS and DIDS, are committed to employment as a priority outcome for students with intellectual disabilities. Additionally, these agencies have a history of effective collaboration. The State also has an exceptional benefits to work program that is a considerable resource to this system.

There are, however, significant barriers to employment for students with intellectual disabilities. The gaps in availability of work-based learning opportunities and the priority on academic achievement in public school systems inhibit vocational preparation. Further, the DIDS waiting list means funding for on-going supports for job retention, which is needed by many transitioning students, is not available. Finally, there seems to be insufficient use of benefits planning resources during the transition process.

Wanda Willis, executive director of the Council on Developmental Disabilities, said, “We have a lot of work to do to improve policies and programs that support students with intellectual disabilities in planning for life after high school. All students completing public education programs need support in thinking about the next step—college, tech school, a job, or maybe internships to provide experience in different work environments. Students with intellectual disabilities in Tennessee currently have limited structured activities and processes that help in connecting them to the next steps in their lives. The Council and our partners believe in a vision of employment for transitioning students with intellectual disabilities.”

To plan for progress, the Council convened a Transition Workgroup comprised of representatives from all State departments involved in the transition process, local school systems, advocacy organizations, UT-CDE and the Vanderbilt Kennedy Center. The primary objective of the workgroup is “mapping” resources to support the transition of students with disabilities. The group, however, also is developing an Interagency Agreement on Transition to structure each agency’s responsibilities in the transition process. Ms. Willis said, “This very diverse and industrious group is working on specific goals to improve transition services and increase employment outcomes for Tennessee students with disabilities.” It is hoped that the workgroup’s efforts will define the next stage of progress in school to work transition that will make the process a “pipeline” to good jobs and opportunities for independence for students with intellectual disabilities.

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