

Welcoming developmentally disabled into work force works for all involved

About a year and a half ago, I dropped my wife Nuala off at work because her car needed some maintenance. She works for a public elementary school as an instructional assistant for kids with developmental disabilities.



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I was fortunate enough to meet one of her students that morning as she headed off to class. Her name was Ellie. Ellie has Down Syndrome and is one of several kids that my wife teaches each day.

Each of her students is part of a special "learning for life" education program for children with developmental disabilities. The program teaches kids basic skills to adapt and meet the challenges

of life including living on their own, getting along with others and eventually working.

Soon after, my meeting with Ellie led to me to an experience that I will never forget. In early summer 2006, I met Steve Morgan, the executive director of the Arc of Baltimore. The Arc of Baltimore has been around for nearly 60 years, assisting persons with developmental disabilities in just about all facets of their life.

Steve is a dedicated, caring and outgoing person who introduced me to the extent of their employment services for those who are disabled. He talked to me about the Arc's supported employment opportunities where individuals are hired and are generally independent after they are coached and supported by the Arc. Just some of the jobs that these individuals perform are landscaping, janitorial, door-to-door recycling and new phone assembly. Steve set me up on a tour of the University of Maryland, Baltimore to see how they have integrated workers into their staff.

The beauty of the program is that the Arc is always there as a support mechanism. They coach, train and work with the employer and the employee to ensure a smooth transition and open communication.

I spoke with several of the workers throughout my tour of UMB and found them engaged, excited and proud to be part of a team that has a purpose. Their supervisors were equally pleased. They exclaimed how loyal, dedicated and willing to learn they all were, and I could tell they had built tremendous working relationships with each other. They were doing various janitorial duties throughout the building unsupervised. They were taught to do a certain job and they performed it well. Some of them worked together in teams while others worked on their own. I was touched by the whole experience.

The Arc of Baltimore will soon be launching a new program called Project Search, which is in the initial stages of completion. Project Search is based on a model at the Children's Hospital in Cincinnati and will offer high school seniors with developmental disabilities a combination of intern positions and job placement services.

Many companies, including Koons Chevrolet, Whiteford, Taylor and Preston and Syms Clothing, have taken advantage of Arc's services. Every year, the Arc recognizes some of these companies at their "Employers of Distinction" breakfast. I am impressed by the diversity of companies that are using the Arc to help grow their businesses and fill their employment needs.

I respect these companies for seeing the value that people with disabilities can deliver. Maybe you can see the value, too.

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