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On the job training program gives adults with disabilities competitive skills, passion for work



By **Andrea Walker | AMG Marketing**

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Catherine Harris proudly shows off her freshly baked pastries in the kitchen of **The Club** before a catering event. "I love working here," she exclaims. "I learn more about baking a cake, cookies, and how to set-up for banquets. I love my new friends (coworkers)." Catherine is a trainee at The Club through the **UCP of Greater Birmingham G.A.T.E.** (Gaining Access to Employment) program, in partnership with Alabama Department of Rehabilitation Services, and Alabama Department of Mental Health. G.A.T.E. is a five-month long program that provides adults with disabilities an opportunity to gain hands-on work experience through strategic relationships with companies that have specific job needs.

Many people with disabilities work in sheltered workshops, making below minimum wage and segregated from the competitive workforce. The G.A.T.E. program sets out to prove that these individuals can meet, and often exceed, the expectations of employers. Catherine is currently one of five trainees who work at The Club learning skills in the Store Room, Banquet kitchen, Salads, Bakery, Main Kitchen, and. They work every weekday from 9:00 a.m. till 1:30 p.m. and have regular employee breaks. They work alongside experienced staff, assisting in various tasks while moving around to different departments. "This is the first time I ever got to learn how to use a knife," remarks Catherine who now works in the bakery after her rotation in the main kitchen and salads.

Before joining G.A.T.E., Catherine worked at the UCP sheltered workshop. She now has found a passion for cooking and wants to work in a kitchen, something many people would never have expected someone like Catherine to be able to do. Wendy Lawless, a job coach for the G.A.T.E. program, says that there's no special treatment for the trainees except some additional hands-on training that the other employees are more than happy to provide. Lawless remarks that this experience is so essential for

building their resumes and showing other potential employers that they are capable of performing normal jobs. "Our goal is to get them ready for employment in a competitive workforce. We're trying to find ways that these adults can find meaningful and enjoyable work."

Other employees at The Club have grown very fond of their fellow coworkers and love helping the trainees in their learning process. "When we work alongside our G.A.T.E trainees who are so excited to show up for work every day, it gives us a new appreciation for our own work," says Cassie McCay, Member Relations and Marketing Manager for The Club. "It's amazing to see the friendships that have evolved from the program between the trainees and the employees." Lawless says that more companies like The Club need to be open to exploring G.A.T.E. and could greatly benefit from the trainees. "They are loyal, they are dependable, they enjoy the work, and are just a positive influence on everyone around them."

Employment Services at UCP has many short term and long term programs that give businesses a chance to explore the options of hiring a person with a disability. Many times, something as simple as a working interview for a couple of hours can help determine if this person may be a good fit for your business.

For more information, please contact: Wendy Lawless, GATE Job Coach, UCP of Greater Birmingham, 205-451-7745
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