

Work in progress

Via's pilot program helps people with disabilities jump-start their career.



Billy Simmons, 30, of Allentown is starting a pet fish store in the city with help from the Via program.

By Romy Varghese | Of The Morning Call
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Billy Simmons of Allentown knows all about tropical fish. He can tell you which ones are freshwater and which are the most colorful. So when his job coach from Via of the Lehigh Valley, a nonprofit that serves people with disabilities, talked to him about starting his own business, their brainstorming naturally led to a fish store.

In a few weeks, Simmons, who was diagnosed with a developmental disability as a child, will be selling 63 kinds of fish through his Web site, www.billystropicalfish.com.

Asked why he got into the program, Simmons, 30, didn't hesitate: "To make money, and plus, it's cool."

Simmons is one of five Lehigh Valley residents with developmental disabilities in a customized employment program believed to be one of only a few in Pennsylvania.

Via's pilot program is helping Simmons and a Nazareth woman set up their own businesses. The other three, who live in Lehigh County, are receiving equipment that makes them attractive hires.

For instance, Ben Yorgey, 22, struggled to find work. Then Via bought him an automated pool cleaner, which helped land him a job at the pool in Macungie Memorial Park.

"Why can't a person with a disability start his or her own business, if that's what they want to do?" said Karen Whitehill, Via's board chairwoman and senior vice president at Keystone Nazareth Bank & Trust.

Encouraging entrepreneurship is the latest in strategies to expand employment among people with disabilities. According to the U.S. Department of Labor, about 70 percent of adults with disabilities are unemployed -- "a huge waste of human potential," Whitehill said.

Years ago, the only option for those who wanted to work were workshops, sheltered environments in which they did repetitive tasks.

Agencies such as Via help people with disabilities find work within the community and earn wages by identifying willing

employers. Still, employment continues to be a challenge.

In the past few years, officials from Lehigh and Northampton counties began meeting as a committee to discuss how to improve and increase employment opportunities, said Tim Boyer, Lehigh County director of mental retardation and early intervention programs.

They heard some businesses would be willing to hire but didn't have the money to buy equipment that would make it work, he said.

To assist in the committee's efforts, the state's office of development programs gave Lehigh County \$23,682. The county in June allocated the funds to Via, which was getting its customized program under way.

Via's foundation contributed an additional \$5,000, and NISH, a national organization for people with severe disabilities, allocated \$10,000 to start the program.

Via officials said it's the first in the state to take the customized approach that focuses on entrepreneurship and satisfying equipment needs of both employer and employee. Boyer said he believes it's one of at least a few. Officials from the state Department of Public Welfare said they are encouraging efforts throughout the state to boost employment.

"Having a job is something that Americans value," said Kevin Casey, the deputy secretary for the department's office of developmental programs. "It makes people with disabilities taxpayers, not tax-spenders."

In late April, Jodi Oberto started working for Lomae Foods, The Morning Call's cafeteria service in Allentown. The company's owner, Tina Maehrer, heard about the Via program through the Community Action Development Corp. of Allentown, which had arranged the financing of her new business.

By hiring Oberto, Maehrer got not only a needed employee but also the equipment Via bought for Oberto: a refrigerated chest for ice cream, pressure washer, microwave and portable salad bar. Oberto, who lives in Egypt, washes dishes, stocks the ice cream chest, and does some food preparation such as grating carrots.

"It may be a challenge, but it pays off," Maehrer said. She added she would "definitely" hire another person with disabilities.

Oberto, 32, said her job is fun. She and others with disabilities find purpose with their jobs.

After Ben Yorgey graduated from Emmaus High School in June 2006, he couldn't find a job. A lively young man who likes to socialize, Yorgey would get frustrated and angry, said his mother, Ardy.

Ultimately, Yorgey, equipped with the automated pool cleaner he calls "Nemo," started working at the Macungie Pool in late May. Yorgey and Nemo are saving the pool \$3,000 in overtime costs for the lifeguards who used to manually clean the pool, pool manager Alice Welsh said.

"Once he got a job, there was a peace and calm that settled over him," Ardy Yorgey said.

Ben Yorgey, who wanted to treat his parents to dinner after getting his first paycheck, also will work year-round at the park thanks to a leafblower and snowblower Via is purchasing for him.

Success, said Corey Smith, Via's director of employment services, will be measured by the clients' incomes, job satisfaction and ability to take on more responsibilities with less supervision.

For instance, Yorgey, if he weren't working, would be in a day activity camp that costs "big state dollars," Smith said. His parents hope eventually he will perform his jobs without the supervision of a Via coach, who's funded through the county.

The program is also good economic development, said Whitehill, pointing to Simmons' new office in a downtown Allentown building, where he keeps his tropical fish tanks.

The hope, she said, is to expand the program to more clients and inspire other agencies to take creative approaches.