

Defying expectations

Kraus-Anderson Construction Co. and Bryce Larson are doing things differently — and breaking barriers in the process.

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Bryce Larson is 26 years old, and his co-workers at a prominent local construction firm are quick to note the young man's infectious laugh and diligent work ethic.

That he has such a job may not sound remarkable, but it is, for Bryce was born with Down syndrome.

Also remarkable, for those who know the sandy-haired young man well, is Bryce's fondness for his "new home" in the Circle Pines office of Kraus-Anderson Construction Co., because typically he is very shy. Since starting his job as an administrative assistant this past March, Bryce has established friendships with a number of the branch's 250 employees. Supervisor BriAna Hogie said "he brightens everyone's day" as he weaves among a host of appliances that have become a sort of shorthand for the American business office: printers, copiers, fax machines and other clerical lifesavers — each labeled with a name tag and number for Bryce's benefit.

The construction industry is probably not the first place people think of when job hunting for those with physical or cognitive disabilities. But the large,



Bryce Larson is an administrative assistant for Kraus-Anderson Construction Co. The firm has worked to incorporate the young man with Down syndrome into its Circle Pines office, earning it the "large metro employer of the year" award from the Minnesota Rehabilitation Association. (Submitted photo)

Minneapolis-based construction firm decided to do just that, hiring Bryce through Minnetonka outreach organization Opportunity Partners.

Eight months later, Kraus-Anderson has been named "large metro employer of the year" by the Minnesota Rehabilitation Association (MRA), becoming the first construction company to receive such a distinction.

"We all knew Kraus-Anderson was a different type of company than we've nominated in the past," said Justina Cloutier, president-elect of MRA's Job Placement and Development division. "I think what

they've been able to do is just the tip of the iceberg for them."

Since hiring Bryce, Kraus-Anderson has continued to work with Opportunity Partners, a nonprofit that serves more than 1,300 Twin Cities' clients with disabilities: the company has hired another employee via the nonprofit—with possibly more coming up.

"We want to challenge ourselves to be a more diverse organization," said John Campobasso, senior vice president of business development at Kraus-Anderson.

Defying Expectations: 'It's worth it. He adds a lot of value to the office.'

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"And in doing that, we can have an impact on people that don't have it as easy in life."

Margo Foster, a job developer at Opportunity Partners, said her organization wants to prove that individuals with a variety of disabilities can prove a valuable asset in positions throughout the workforce. But her organization doesn't want employers to work with them out of charity.

"This is a real job, you're paid real money and there are expectations you'll be required to meet if you want to keep that job," Foster said, adding that employers must pay a prevailing wage. "We want people to look at our clients and not put them in a box, to think that they can only work as a janitor or in food service."

In fact, Bryce's last job was a food service position at medical technology company MedTronic – another connection made by Opportunity Partners. Representatives from Opportunity Partners facilitate job placement and can assist with on-the-job training during the first weeks of a client's employment, if necessary.

In Bryce's case, Kraus-Anderson tailored a position to meet both his skill set and the needs of the office. Opportunity Partners officials – who sparked the firm's interest with a corporate presentation on diverse hiring practices last year – met with office staff members to teach them about how to work with a disabled person. And a task handbook was cre-

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ated for Bryce to outline the company's expectations for him.

For Bryce, various clerical tasks around the office tie in perfectly with his abilities. Faxes and copiers have been numbered and labeled to help him, and he prefers to perform tasks in a similar pattern from day to day. But otherwise, co-workers said he is a productive team member who requires little supervision.

"Initially, we needed to brainstorm to come up with more tasks because he was exceeding our expectations," Hogie said.

Diane Duguay, Kraus-Anderson's human resources coordinator, said she and other co-workers keep trying to find new ways to challenge Bryce within his skill set. Each new task requires a formal learning process, which is

handled by Hogie, Bryce's supervisor. Opportunity Partners has little involvement in his day-to-day work activities now, apart from providing transportation to and from his job.

Within the firm, Duguay spear-headed the effort to hire Bryce last spring. But Bryce already had a personal connection to the Circle Pines office: His father, Jim, is general superintendent at Circle Pines, though Jim is rarely in the office and doesn't see Bryce at work very often. Jim said his son talks about work often at home and has become friends with a number of his co-workers. However, Jim was initially concerned about the idea of bringing Bryce onboard.

"I originally said I didn't know if it was such a good idea to have Bryce

work in the same place as I do, because I don't want people to think that he just has a job because of me," Jim said.

But Duguay said she was impressed by Bryce's abilities, attitude and friendly nature, and was determined to create a place for him at Kraus-Anderson.

"It does take a little bit of work to get started," Duguay said of the training process. "But when you see that reward, and how he interacts with the rest of the staff, it's worth it. He adds a lot of value to the office."

That "little bit of work" appears to have paid off. Co-workers say Bryce openly enjoys his job and hopes to remain with Kraus-Anderson permanently, which Foster said she hopes as well.

"My dream is that I

would really love to see Bryce work with them long-term, and perhaps even one day retire with them," Foster said.

But the significance of Bryce's success may well reach beyond his own personal story, Foster noted. The work he performs could set an example for the construction industry as a whole.

This past summer, for example, Kraus-Anderson hired several people with disabilities to perform final clean-up work at the Rondo Community Outreach Library in St. Paul.

The employees were recruited through Kaposia in St. Paul, another outreach organization that seeks to provide disabled employees with various job opportunities. Jon Alexander, director of operations at Kaposia, said he believed it was the first time people with disabilities had been specifically hired to work on a construction site.

"It was a one-time thing, but we got a chance to at least educate companies a bit and demonstrate that it can be done," he said.

Jim Larson said he hopes his son's example can show peers in the business community that the construction industry and the disabled don't have to be mutually exclusive.

"It all depends on which part of the construction business you're looking at," Larson said. "There are a lot of different people with disabilities that can do lots of things in the industry if they're only given a chance."

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