

INDEX

Media: NBC merging with Vivendi Universal businesses . . .D3
Workplace columnD2 StocksD5
Business Briefing . .D2, D3 Mutual fundsD6

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* StarTribune

Thursday, October 9, 2003 • Section **D**

Enabling the disabled

By **Gwendolyn Freed**
Star Tribune Staff Writer

Thanks to Becky Larson, Mike Colbert's floors, bathrooms and countertops gleam. His coffee-cup dispenser is full and his potato chip bags face front. "Becky doesn't stop from the minute she gets here to the minute she leaves," Colbert said. "Every day she's looking for something new to do."

Customers at Colbert's Fernbrook Holiday Station Store in Plymouth see Larson sweeping up or refilling the sauerkraut dispenser. What they don't see is Opportunity Partners, the \$20 million non-profit organization that makes her job and hundreds of others like it possible throughout the Twin Cities area.

Founded by parents of people with disabilities, Opportunity Partners has spent

the past 50 years securing jobs for people with developmental disabilities and other special needs. Through a range of vocational programs, it places and supports more than 800 clients annually, partnering with about 150 local businesses — including McDonald's, Burger King, Wal-Mart, Target and a host of small and mid-size concerns.

The word "disabled" falls short, according to Colbert and other local employers of mentally retarded, autistic, brain-injured and otherwise challenged adults. Such workers are highly reliable and productive, they say, helping businesses make money, even in tough economic times.

A soft job market has stymied the organization's growth. Some longtime partners are unable to hire as

many workers as before, and other businesses are simply not hiring at all. From a high of 380 new placements in 2000, the organization says it's on track to make about 200 this year. "We were affected by 9/11 because we place a lot of workers

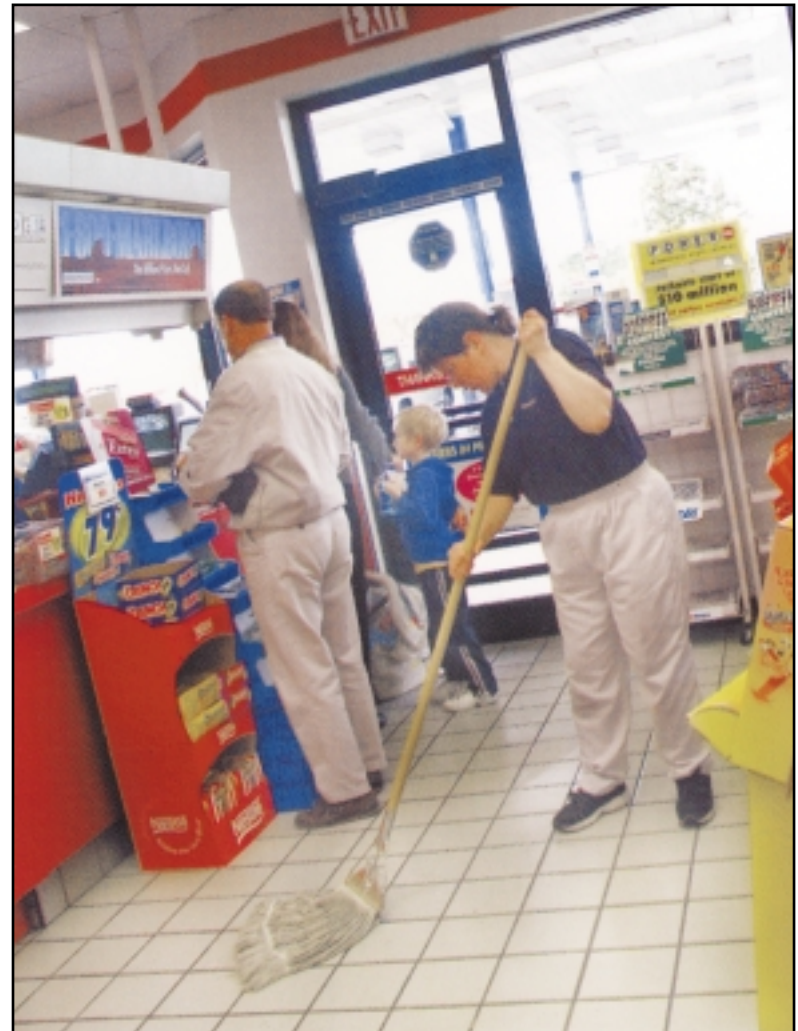
in the hospitality industry," said Tim Vicchiollo, vice president of vocational services.

PARTNERS continues on D4:
— Clients are assessed and job candidates are pinpointed for ideal positions.

"It's a financial benefit for us as employers, and it's a social benefit for them."

— **Mark McAlister,**
CEO, Trans Tech

For 50 years, Opportunity Partners has helped people with disabilities secure jobs.



Gwendolyn Freed/Star Tribune
Fridley resident Becky Larson mops floors, cleans bathrooms, arranges merchandise and stocks shelves at the Fernbrook Holiday Station store in Plymouth.

PARTNERS from D1*Opportunity Partners clients help companies save money*

Since then, his agency has felt the brunt of the sluggish economy.

That's a shame, said Mark McAlister, CEO of Medina-based Trans Tech, which sells used telecommunications products. Businesses stand to benefit from the organization's programs more during a slump than at any other time, he said.

Telephones aren't selling well, and there have been layoffs at Trans Tech. But Opportunity Partners workers would be the last to go, said McAlister. Since 1990, a team of seven to 10 Opportunity Partners clients has worked full-time at the company, refurbishing about 150,000 telephones and related products annually.

"They save us approximately \$350,000 a year, which would be the additional cost of sending the work out to another

company," said McAlister, who pays the workers by the part, which works out to slightly better than minimum wage.

Opportunity Partners tries to make it hard for employers to say no. All clients are thoroughly assessed by experienced evaluators who pinpoint ideal candidates for specific positions, saving companies time and money that would otherwise go to help-wanted ads, applicant screening and interviews.

Once a client is placed, the organization provides free training on how best to welcome and work with a disabled person, including tips on building a sensitive and inclusive workplace. "You'd be surprised, but people really do feel uncertain in some of these situations," Vicchiollo said. "Going through the dos and don'ts

with them helps a lot."

When work begins, employers soon notice a key difference between Opportunity Partners clients and their mainstream, entry-level counterparts: Opportunity Partners clients show up every day, on time. The agency facilitates door-to-door rides through arrangements with a number of local transportation providers — 1,400 rides a day, at last count.

The support does not end there. Opportunity Partners staff, including job coaches and counselors, pay regular visits to job sites to hear from clients and employers how things are going. At sites such as Trans Tech where teams of clients work together, agency staff supervise full-time.

Many clients get medical benefits through the state, saving employers money. If workers are hired on a contract basis — as about one-fifth of them are — the agency covers compensation and liability insurance.

"It's a financial benefit for us as employers," said Trans

Tech's McAlister, "and it's a social benefit for them."

Kathy McPherson's son Ben has reaped those benefits. After a string of unsuccessful forays into the work world, Ben was referred to Opportunity Partners several years ago. According to McPherson, the organization recognized that, with a form of autism known as Asperger's syndrome, Ben is well-suited to work that stimulates him intellectually but doesn't stress him initially with much personal interaction.

Ben was placed with Chronimed, a specialty pharmacy distribution company in Minnetonka, where he has his own cubicle and computer and divides his time between filing paperwork and delivering faxed orders and daily reports to client service representatives and pharmacists.

"When he first started working with us two years ago, he wouldn't talk to anybody," said Julie Sherman, manager of supported employment pro-

grams at the company. "He was very withdrawn and wouldn't make eye contact."

Supported by awareness training from the agency, colleagues treated Ben with respect but did not push him to interact, Sherman said. He has blossomed as a result.

"He's certainly a lot more outgoing and interactive in a positive way," Sherman said. "He'll laugh at jokes, and he seems to be a much happier person. He's made friends, and he and his mother have come to our holiday party for the last two years. That's something he would never have done before. He's just really mainstreamed himself here socially." Now 25, Ben shares an apartment with a friend and lives almost fully on his own.

Such successes don't come cheap. It costs Opportunity Partners \$7 to \$80 a day to support an individual client. The organization relies primarily on government funding, which will shrink by at least 1 percent in 2004. Clients also contribute to the organi-

zation by paying a bit of their own way, usually between \$1,000 and \$2,000 a year once they are launched in jobs.

Alesa Koppen, vice president of R.E. Purvis, roots for the organization's continued success. Opportunity Partners clients make up about a third of the workforce at her Bloomington-based distributor of equipment parts to manufacturers. Working in teams supervised by Opportunity Partners staff, they carry out a range of tasks, including assembling O-rings and putting together equipment repair kits. "They've been a great addition to our workforce and allowed our company to grow in many ways."

It feels good to work with an organization that helps disabled people, but community service is not her only aim in the partnership, said Koppen. "These people are dedicated workers, who contribute to the bottom line."

Gwendolyn Freed is at gfreed@startribune.com.