

On-the-job respect

Mentally handicapped adapt

University students studying in the EMU Skylight often peek up from their books to watch the workers around them.

The eight "severely handicapped" — more commonly called "mentally retarded" — students have generated much curiosity since they began working in the Skylight about three years ago.

The work program is the brainchild of Martin Sheehan, vocational specialist with the Lane Education Service District. Sheehan, who received a doctorate degree in special education from the University, developed the program because there were no such vocational opportunities available to the severely handicapped student.

Until recently, most severely handicapped adults were kept primarily in institutions or adult day programs that offered "low-level infantilizing activities," like basket weaving or watching television, Sheehan says.

"There are a lot of myths that the severely handicapped can't work," Sheehan says. "But we're seeing that severely handicapped people can make it in society (provided

Ward.

Most of the students work every weekday, for two to six hours. Along with their job duties, the students learn "functional living skills" most people take for granted, such as taking a bus to and from home alone, buying things in a store, punching a time clock, arriving to work on time, and presenting themselves in an "appropriate" manner.

Besides Sheehan, the students have a "trainer," Penelope O'Shatz, who closely monitors nearly everything they do while they are working. O'Shatz also makes sure the students don't get lost en route from school to campus.

Wherever there is a worker, O'Shatz is usually close behind watching the students' every move and catching problems before they arise. This close monitoring distinguishes the relatively new program from others that have preceded it.

Most programs in the past, Sheehan says, followed the "place, train and forget model," which is inadequate for the severely handicapped who need constant, close monitoring.

Part of this close monitoring includes charting each student's progress on specific tasks, including appearance and behavior. And before they start work each day, the students check a picture-cue board, which has photographs explaining each step of their jobs.

Close monitoring also includes lots of reinforcement. As a trainer, O'Shatz "walks a fine line in giving them positive reinforcement and telling them what I want." On a particularly frustrating day for one worker, O'Shatz corrected him "one time too many" and he let out a bellow that could be heard throughout the Skylight's levels, she says.

When students do exhibit "inappropriate behaviors," O'Shatz gently but firmly reprimands them.

"We expect appropriate behaviors," Sheehan says. "And if we don't get them we let the student know that if you want to work here you have to act in an appropriate way. A lot of people say 'He's got the body of an 18 year-old but the mind of a 2 year-old.' We're saying he's an 18 year-old so let's treat him like one."

Unlike most people, the severely handicapped workers generally don't have fragile egos, which makes O'Shatz's job of giving constructive criticism easier.

"You can say to them, 'You know, it really looks weird when you stick your finger up your nose.' There's none of that ego involvement," she says.

Occasionally, the workers do exhibit "weird behaviors," she says, and University students will look on curiously. One University student wondered whether or not the workers were "on display" because

'There are a lot of myths that the severely handicapped can't work'

— Martin Sheehan

they) have close monitoring throughout their lives."

The Skylight, which serves as a cafeteria, study area and general gathering place, is the central work site for the vocational program. It is one of only a handful of similar programs in the United States that cater specifically to the moderately to severely handicapped person, Sheehan says.

Because of this, the local program is highly regarded by special education professionals around the nation. In fact, other states have modeled similar programs after Sheehan's.

Most University students would find the handicapped workers' jobs boring. Cleaning pots and pans. Bussing tables. Washing dishes.

The workers, though, "love their jobs," Sheehan says, perhaps because for most of the workers, these are their first jobs.

"I sure do (like my job)," Mark says. "It's my first time doing pots and pans. I never get bored. I like working here. The people are very nice. People don't bug us here," he says.

Most University students also support the program. "I think it's a great program. It's a good opportunity for the kids and for the University," says journalism senior Lynn



Penelope O'Shatz closely monitors the job of a mentally handicapped worker in the Skylight.

people stare at them.

But her students "are not really aware they're different. Generally I think they feel good about themselves, especially being here and working," O'Shatz says.

Besides, Sheehan says handicapped students "have got to learn how to handle ridicule." Integrating retarded students into the mainstream is risky compared with cloistering them in safe, segregated institutions. "But this is the dignity of risking and

the danger of living," he says.

"We're basically against any kind of institution for any handicapped person in this nation. They have a right to homes, schooling and a place in society. They have a right to the same things as anyone else."

Story by Joan Herman
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