

ProAct names 2009 Employers of the Year

Eagan-based nonprofit selects T.J. Maxx, Rapala and Apothecary Products

ProAct Inc., an Eagan-based organization serving individuals with disabilities, has selected three organizations for "Employer of the Year" awards.

T.J. Maxx in Eagan, Rapala in Eagan and Apothecary Products in Burnsville were each recognized at ProAct's 37th Annual Awards Dinner in October for their exceptional efforts in employing people with disabilities.

"Employers are at the heart of ProAct's mission," said ProAct President Steve Ditschler. "The work they provide is invaluable to ProAct's individuals, and we salute them."

The winners were chosen for three categories, Supported Employment, Community Employment and Business Partner.

Each was honored before a crowd of nearly 600 at the Prom Center in Oakdale.

Winning recognition for the Supported Employment category, T.J. Maxx in Eagan has maintained an eight year relationship with ProAct.

"They're always very caring and patient with our people," said Ken Gray, a ProAct coordinator of Vocational Services.

The off-price store that sells clothing and products for the home hosts ProAct job tryouts for multiple positions, including stocking, processing, fitting rooms, cashiering and building maintenance, said Gray.



Photo submitted

Accepting the award for ProAct's Business Partner Employer of the Year was Apothecary Products' Ken Halvorsen, who heads the company's master scheduling and forecasting area.

Several individuals from ProAct were hired for competitive employment positions by T.J. Maxx. The store has employed people from ProAct in funded internships, temporary work assignments funded by Minnesota Vocational Rehabilitation Services.

T.J. Maxx Operations Manager Barbara McGregor said the store sets up a comfortable environment for ProAct individuals where they can learn new skills.

"It's a win-win situation for both of us," she said.

ProAct knows the store's business routines, its poli-

cies and procedures and people from ProAct are willing to learn something new when there are changes, the manager explained.

"They work here like they're part of our store. It doesn't feel like they're separate because they've been here for so long," McGregor said.

Reeling in the win for the Community Employment category, Rapala and its Eagan distribution center were selected based on a strong connection with ProAct, one that has led to greater work variety for people with disabilities.

"They've allowed us

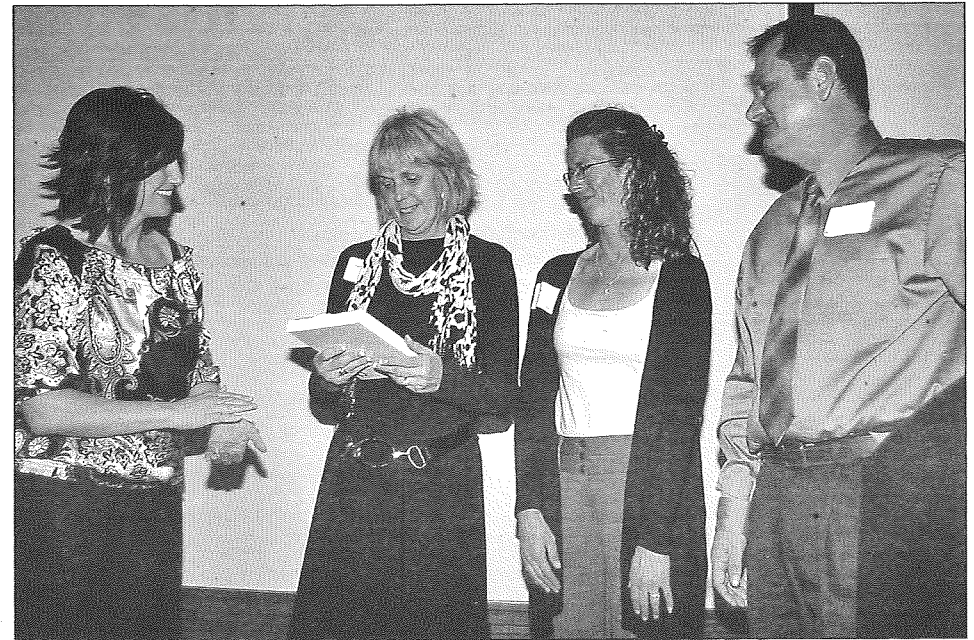


Photo by Tad Johnson

Presenting the ProAct Employer Award for Supported Employment was KARE-11 weekend anchor Rena Sarigianopoulos, left, and ProAct vocational coordinator Ken Gray, right. At center are T.J. Maxx operations manager Barbara McGregor and, Beth Wyatt, who manages the back room at the Eagan store.

many opportunities to excel," said ProAct employment manager Catherine McCoy, "From simple packaging tasks to the assembly of a various items for dealers throughout the U.S."

The distributor of fishing lures and other products manages about 10,000 different items, shipping them to the entire U.S. through its 130,000 square-foot Eagan warehouse, according to Rapala Distribution Manager Jim George. ProAct individuals work on packaging for products headed to 43 Walmart distribution centers.

"They're excellent in terms of communications," said George. "They have always been able to provide for our needs."

Staffing flexibility has been a highlight for Rapala, which has hosted ProAct crews as large as 25, but

typically employs a crew of 10. "I know we have a very good partnership and it's grown," George said. "We've got additional kits that we build now and we're very happy."

The third Employer of the Year Award goes to Apothecary Products, a major pharmacy supplier based in Burnsville.

Winning recognition for the Business Partner category, Apothecary utilizes ProAct for a substantial amount of work on a regular basis, said Dave Cavalier, ProAct's Eagan director of production services.

The tasks fit ProAct especially well because they require people with different skill levels, Cavalier explained.

Apothecary's Ken Halvorsen, who heads the company's master scheduling and forecasting area, said ProAct has three pri-

mary strong points that have made an impression: its quality, communication and customer service and the turnaround time for jobs.

The nonprofit handles Apothecary products that help administer medications and vitamins.

"I hope our relationship in business keeps growing as they've been a good partner so far," he said.

ProAct is headquartered in Eagan and has additional operations in Red Wing, Zumbrota, Hudson and River Falls, Wis.

Its mission is to serve individuals experiencing barriers to employment and self-sufficiency due to intellectual and developmental disabilities, physical disabilities, mental health, traumatic brain injuries, and other challenges.