

CINDY GEHL
DERRICK WILLIAMS
ERIN JOHNSON

Realtor adds retail in Farmington **2A**
Business owners oppose new fees **9A**
Library seeks coffee shop operator **9A**

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B U S I N E S S W E E K L Y

Creating work opportunities

Egan-based nonprofit starts new work, life skills, recreation program for young adults with disabilities

With the encouragement of a group of Wisconsin parents of young adults with disabilities, Egan-based ProAct has created a new program that combines work, life skills training and recreation called "Life Opportunities," a highly active and mobile effort to serve recent transition program graduates from Hudson High School and others in the area.

"The most important component is that it's all in the community and it's based in the community," said Carolyn Dobis, director of programs and services for ProAct.

Therapeutic horseback riding, meal preparation and housekeeping, warehouse packaging work, healthy eating and fitness activities are just a few of the elements offered.

The ultimate goal, according to leaders, is to help people with disabilities to lead more fulfilling and productive lives. Multiple sites in River Falls and Hudson are employed to maintain a busy routine with a great deal of variety for the eight individual group members, aged 21 and older, who are served currently.

A portion of the startup costs for Life Opportunities was covered by a grant from the Andersen Corporate Foundation.

Jeff Hallbeck, who has a daughter in the program, employs the participants in a variety of tasks at his restaurant supply business, SORSA in Hudson.

After finding out how limited the post-high school employment prospects were



Photo submitted

ProAct program participants work at SORSA sorting dinnerware by size and color on workdays to earn paychecks.

for his daughter, Lauren, he began meeting with other parents and teachers from Hudson High School in October of 2008.

"We met weekly, planning what kind of program would benefit our daughter and Lou's (Mary Lou Stuesser) daughter," said Hallbeck. "We felt that ProAct had the resources to come over to St. Croix County and run it."

The distributor of restaurant products hopes to attract other area businesses to employ people from Life Opportunities.

Stuesser, who operates the stables in River Falls, where the participants ride horses with assistance twice a week, works closely alongside the animals and even rides with a young man who uses a wheel-

chair. The activity helps people with physical disabilities to stretch and work muscles that they might not otherwise use.

She was especially impressed with ProAct Case Manager Stephanie Briggs and human service technician LeAnn Mergens, the program's primary staff members.

"These two are hard workers and do a really good job of working together," Stuesser said. "Not any two people could make this work and they truly have."

Stuesser helped set up buildings at the stables to be used for life skills classes, meals and other recreational functions. These include indoor and outdoor riding arenas, a furnished and insulated



Photo submitted

As part of the ProAct work program, participants also take horse-riding lessons. The activity helps people with physical disabilities to stretch and work muscles that they might not otherwise use.

outbuilding with a deck overlooking the riding area and a separate kitchen and family room area for meals and other programming.

Support from Hudson High School has been ongoing, with a great deal of input from teacher Jim Schreiber, who was involved in the planning meetings.

"I just wanted to have another option for these kids to go to," he said. "That's what my main intention was," said Schreiber, who often visits the stables on his own time.

As a primary teacher for many of the program participants for the past four to six years, Schreiber had an equal interest in seeing his students succeed. He works with children and young adults with cognitive disabilities.

Briggs said participants have become happier and healthier through their in-

volvement in Life Opportunities. Some use adaptive equipment to perform everyday tasks. One individual chooses phrases on a speaking device to let others know his thoughts and needs.

Mergens, who has 20 years in the disabilities field, drives the ProAct bus across a wide area to pick up participants, and provides direct care during the day. The structure lends itself to a high energy level and the group meshes well, the staff members explained.

From meal preparation to cleaning and laundry, most of the services associated with the program are performed by the participants themselves. Students from the University of Wisconsin-River Falls may also be helping with the program soon.

As some participants sort SORSA dinnerware by size

and color on workdays to earn paychecks, others run a paper shredder to dispose of documents.

Later, at the Hudson YMCA, they take part in weight training, basketball and swimming. Each function offers another opportunity for personal growth.

"It means the world to me to see this program working and succeeding," said Hallbeck. "I don't know what these young adults would do sit around and watch TV?"

ProAct is a 501(c) 3 nonprofit corporation which has served the needs of people with disabilities and other challenges for more than 35 years. With facilities in Egan, Red Wing and Zumbrota, ProAct serves people from the Twin Cities, southern Minnesota and western Wisconsin.