Volume 13 Issue 2 August 2016

ZUMBROTA CREW FINDS STEADY WORK CLOSE TO HOME

To find a crew of flexible workers in the small town of Zumbrota, a growing filter distribution company tapped ProAct, and found some local residents who on most days had been traveling 27 miles for work through the nonprofit.

Commercial Water Distributing (CWD) sells water and air filters of many kinds, and ProAct sorts them and applies labels, readying products for shipment. Boxes and pallets are all around with some work tables placed near a warehouse window with a fan. It opens to a green prairie scene outside.

"I like it out here," said crewmember Jen Speikers. "There's less drama and it's smaller and more laid back." The ProAct crew members received company shirts and have participated in food events, enjoyed ice cream and "bagel Mondays."

Most of the crew were previously based in-center at ProAct, said Designated Coordinator Joyann Johnson in Red Wing. Time needed for the trip in from Zumbrota and then back limited their options for Red Wing area group employment, she explained. The opportunity to work, to find something in a community like that, "that's huge," said Johnson.

There was a steep learning curve, with multiple product types and labels, such as RB, L3 and

See Small town stability, page 3

Nestled in a prairie near U.S. Highway 52, Commercial Water Distributing in Zumbrota is growing, with packaging and labeling help from ProAct. From left are: Site Supervisor Jim Bergeson, Melodie Davis, Jamie Gjense, Patty Kennedy and Jen Speikers.

FAMILY/GUARDIANS MEET IN EAGAN

A group of more than 65 parents and guardians assembled in May at ProAct in Eagan for an update on system changes, and to share their views about the best services for their loved ones.

One father said his daughter, who is a participant, works an offsite job, takes classes and works on ProAct's production floor. "That's what works for her," he said, noting that there is fear out there that programs will be taken away.

Program Director Carolyn Dobis said systemic changes have increased in the last two years. State licensing reviews have been extended dramatically, and there are many terms and program names for people to learn about, such as the Olmstead Plan, 245D, Positive Practices and WIOA. Her presentation can be viewed at proactinc.org.

Let your voice be heard

If you are a parent or guardian of a ProAct participant in Eagan, please consider attending the next informational meeting on August 25 at 6:30 p.m. Speaker to be announced. Contact Melinda Lien at 651-686-0405, mlien@proactinc.org.

Inside: • Transition student tries out jobs • Finding humor, connecting people • 77 percent working

PANERA MANAGERS SAY SHE'S ONE OF THE BEST

It's 2 p.m. on a Sunday afternoon and a steady flow of diners keeps the Panera in Apple Valley humming. Employee Barb Marr quietly moves about the dining room, getting things ready.

"You don't ever have to ask- she just does it," said Shift Manager Brittany Terry. "It's nice. We'd like to multiply her."

Steady and occupied, Marr clears dishes and wipes tables, keeps the lemonade and tea filled and handles the garbages. A male coworker offers a smile and some encouraging banter. "I heard you over here rocking, Barb. You trying to take my job? She's a good worker."

The work environment is congenial. "The staff there is what makes that place great," said ProAct Designated Coordinator Matt Anderson, who provides support. "They have the utmost respect."

Dining room worker Barb Marr at Panera in Apple Valley with Assistant Manager Anne Lustig.

Marr went through a several month stretch without a job, he said, but she didn't give up. She had experience on a crew at ProAct in Eagan, and at two hotels. Anderson said the current job has given a whole new improvement in "her vibe," and how she carries herself.

Some recent recognition from managers and a Target gift card confirmed Marr's attainments. "It's because I've been working really hard," she said. "Because of the fact that I was really responsible here."

That responsibility manifests itself in the extra things, like sweeping under tables and booths at the end of her shift to make closing easier for others.

Terry said Marr is one of the restaurant's best. "I love having her here, for sure." Another manager, Robin, said when they ask Marr to do things, she says OK, does it and then gets back to whatever she was doing.

Among Panera's best, see page 2

PROACT VETERAN NOW INTAKE CONTACT

She's the first face one sees, and often the first point of contact at ProAct in Eagan, and Autumn Randall brings a wealth of experience with ProAct that practically covers her whole working life.

Autumn Randall

The intake and training coordinator sets up tours, answers questions and refers people to the right sources for funding. While she's energetic, positive and highly organized, she's also worked in almost every department ProAct offers, first starting during the summer when she was 14 years old.

Randall began on the production workfloor, then was a direct service professional, a site supervisor at Panera Bread and, finally, a designated coordinator (case manager) for the last seven years.

"This job will pretty much marry together my experience as a designated coordinator and my education in helping people to learn," she said. Her four-year degree is in secondary education, with an emphasis on psychology.

"I want people to be happy and successful when they are at ProAct, and I feel my position is the start of that," she explains. It's all about helping people to achieve their goals.

Randall replaces Sue Lowe, who asked to return to a designated coordinator post in Day Training and Habilitation.

On Randall's wall is a quote from Sir Winston Churchill, "Attitude is a little thing that makes a big difference."

Simply keeping a positive outlook and sharing a smile can help put someone's day back on the right track, she said. Randall welcomes questions. She's at 651-289-3151, or arandall@proactinc.org.

ProAct Golf Classic

Join us for a delightful day of golf at a championship, private golf club. Start with lunch and check out the silent auction items. A shotgun start and best ball play, with special competitions and gifts. End the day at the clubhouse with appetizers, a gournet meal, live auctions and cash prizes for top golfers.

August 15, Southview Country Club, $150, 10:45 Registration

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From the President...

Summer in Minnesota always inspires and lifts spirits as we savor the sun and the warmth and enjoy the brief, idyllic period. But, alas, storm clouds do appear on occasion and remind us that there are issues and challenges that must be met and resolved.

With ProAct, we have just concluded a program year that has seen the organization post good results for the services provided to clients, with so many benefiting from the training, encouragement and opportunities we offer. Client surveys and comments from family members have been positive, and state reviews were uplifting.

I was most pleased by the response to our parents and guardians meeting in May, where more than 65 people turned out to review and discuss things impacting the delivery of our services. Many expressed concern that current options would be restricted or eliminated over time through decisions by external entities, funding reductions, or both. There was strong support for retaining current service options for people to choose from as well as offering variety to meet individual wants and needs.

One size does not fit all was a common theme. I believe everyone embraces competitive integrated employment as the best option for those who want it, but not necessarily at the expense of those who prefer other options. Some cite the Olmstead plan for Minnesota as a directive to reduce choices, but Judge Donovan Frank concludes his decision by saying that none of the prior discussion's foregoing points should be taken to mean that people would lose any of their options, but rather that their choices would be increased. ProAct intends to continue to offer a variety of quality services as long as they are meeting the needs of the individuals we serve and it is feasible to do so. We believe we can keep options open for persons served while increasing our efforts to support the attainment of competitive integrated employment and community integration. We want to transition with the changes in the service delivery system without leaving anyone behind.

A number of people attending asked what they could do to make their views known and thought we should continue our dialogue with future meetings. We plan to have our next meeting the evening of August 25, with more details to follow. In the meantime, ProAct will advocate for the people we serve and their parents and guardians.

Our only fundraising event, the annual ProAct Golf Classic, will be held on Monday, August 15, at Southview Country Club. We need more golfers, and our scramble format means you don't need to be a good golfer to participate. We can also use items for our silent and live auctions, and sponsorships. Fun, food and fellowship will be the objectives of the day. Hope to see you there.

Meantime, enjoy the delights of summer in Minnesota.

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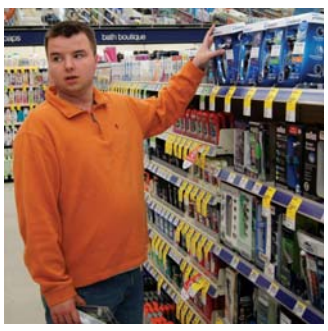
TRANSITION STUDENT EXPLORES WORK

It's an investigatory process, trying out different kinds of jobs to figure out the right fit in Red Wing. STEP transition program student Shane Cadle, 19, spent days working at multiple sites with training and evaluation from ProAct job developer Sam Kapala.



Cannon Falls resident Shane Cadle is off on the right foot in the STEP transition program, exploring job options through ProAct and job developer Sam Kapala, below left.

"He's pretty outgoing and friendly, likes customer interaction and interaction with coworkers," Kapala said.

Kapala trained Cadle on stocking Walgreens shelves for a couple of days, then pulled back to allow the young man to handle it on his own for a couple more. The two also worked together at a bar and grill, and in manufacturing at BIC.

Cadle came with some experience gained from the transition program's Practical Assessment Exploration System. He learned cash register, sorting and clerical skills.

At Walgreens, it was important to track the different product brands, and their placement on displays. Kapala explained that Cadle has some time to learn new skills and make decisions about work.

Cadle's good natured personality stood out to the job developer. "I feel that if a customer came having a bad day, you could make them smile and feel relaxed."

Kapala reminds him that a disability doesn't need to hold him back. "ProAct helps," said Cadle, who is considering working in-center, and on ProAct crews in the community. The job developer was set to meet with Cadle's team to make some recommendations for the types of jobs that matched Cadle's interests and abilities.

Among Panera's best, from page 1

Anderson said she gets along well with coworkers and has been included by others. When she needed a ride to a Panera bowling event after work, another employee stepped up to provide it.

Marr's foundation came partly from in-center work at ProAct in Eagan, where she also served as a peer mentor, training others and organizing things.

She once helped someone set up a boutique, and has an interest in working at a clothing store, stocking items and caring for dressing rooms.

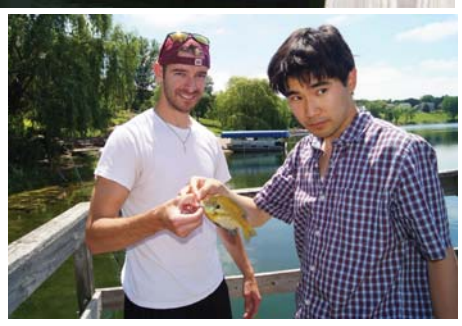
'ON-LINE' FISHING CLASS, CATCHES ON

A class offering that couldn't be more Minnesotan led people to the dock at Lac Lavon Park in Apple Valley for some south metro fishing.

Crappies, bass and sunfish were on the hook for this event, led by direct service professional Ryan Sandberg. He grew up fishing and communicated well with the group.

There was discussion about fish tastes, and interaction with others who had baited lines in the small lake. The group was outfitted with equipment from Gander Mountain.

The group also visits Lake Marion in Lakeville and Blackhawk Lake in Eagan.



Direct service professional Ryan Sandberg, left, joins participant David Choy with a catch.

ProAct in Eagan has grown its class offerings in recent months, partly in an effort to increase community interactions and experiences.

Employer perspective: A great crew

by Todd Johnson, co-owner, A-MAZE-N Products

Our small business makes barbecue accessories to turn any grill into a smoker, and we use a crew from ProAct to prepare and package our products.

We're relatively young as a company, and a few years ago, we thought about hiring people with disabilities. I sat on the idea and used temporary workers instead. Since having ProAct come in, we've realized that people with disabilities are the most underutilized workforce out there. They outwork everyone else we've had.

The main thing we look for in our workers is consistency. This is coupled with proper expectations that are realistic. Maybe a company's expectations are greater than what employees can provide, and managers or owners are disappointed. In our case, ProAct's crew has exceeded my expectations and I will not go back to using temporary help.

Another thing that's right up there for a successful business is communication. We need to be talking back and forth with our crew and the supervisor. If there's an issue, it's addressed right away, we fix it and move on. Personality conflicts might need attention. What's important is that we are aware of any problems, or potential problems, so we can try to solve them.

To give a little more of my background, I must say that I had some experience with people with disabilities when I was in high school, 30 years ago. I taught kids swimming, played in the pool and did gym classes. This gave me a bit of empathy for this people group and I try to instill that in my children, as well.

As a business owner, it's important for people in my position to recognize that everyone has a bad day now and then. I probably tend to give people more chances than others would, but what I'm really trying to build is for people to take some ownership, some responsibility for their jobs and for the company, in some respects.

We let our crew know what projects we have going and allow them to make some choices about the work. That's important to have that freedom, and to be able to change to something else when burnout sets in.

I'm a big believer in this work crew environment leading to an independent job for those who can handle it.

I have learned so much from our crew, which sometimes figures out ways to be more productive that I had never considered.

I've learned a lot about their work abilities. The math and memory skills are there. We may not see them on the surface or in a person's mannerisms. The people we have are truly fun to work with.

My hope is that as people from ProAct experience some greater independence with us, that they will work toward being more independent themselves.

We really didn't have a plan when we decided to hire a ProAct crew. We just made it happen and, together, we've made it work.

A-MAZE-N includes all of its employees in regular cookouts, which we have almost every week. Barbecuing is our business, so it's a chance to make a greater connection with the products we're handling.

I want to say thanks to the staff at ProAct for your important work. There are people in the business world out there who care much like you do. They just need to mesh the economic parts with the workers and make it a winning recipe for everyone.

Get to know us

proactinc.org

Admission Information

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ProAct's Four Locations

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224 S. Main St., Zumbrota, MN 55992
1202 Beaudry Blvd., Hudson, WI 54016

PROACT

ProAct Board of Directors:
John Christiansen, Chuck DeNet, Brian Knapp, Paul Kramp, Mary Ellen Leary, Larry Lehman, Jim Louwagie, Teri McCloughan, Marty Stapleton, Arleen Sullivan and Jon Wilbrecht.

PROACT BRIEFS:

New Hudson BBQ finds employee through ProAct

Dave Anderson, founder of the well known Famous Dave's barbecue chain has a new group of three restaurants in Wisconsin, Old Southern BBQ Smokehouse, and the Hudson location employs an individual from ProAct.

Tony Bollig moved to River Falls from Madison, Wis.

Tony Bollig covers dish duty, bringing 11 years of experience from a grocery store deli in Madison. A machine makes washing easier and faster, and the employee has been well received.

Parking lot improvements

ProAct's main parking area near the loading docks in Eagan will be dug down 30 inches to improve drainage, new semi concrete pads are planned and the entire lot is set for resurfacing.

Pergola donation brings needed shade, outdoor fun

Tom and Phyllis Harper, left and center, parents of Matt Harper at ProAct Life Opportunities in Hudson, donated their time to build a pergola that's meant to block some of the sun. ProAct Program Coordinator Margaret Christensen said it is a "lovely new addition" that gives people more reasons to be outside as much as possible, tending to the garden, relaxing, eating lunch and playing games. Help with some of the materials came from Arrow Building Center in Hudson. At right is area carpenter Todd Herbers, who also volunteered his time.

Parents/guardians invited to second Eagan meeting

Coming off of a successful first meeting of parents and guardians and ProAct leaders, the nonprofit is planning a second gathering to continue the dialogue. The meeting is scheduled for August 25, from 6:30 to 8 p.m., at ProAct's headquarters in Eagan, and a guest speaker will present a governmental perspective on some of the current issues.

"We are excited to dig deeper into understanding the system changes that are taking place, and giving our parents and guardians an opportunity to speak with someone from the government who can share the thinking behind these changes," said CEO Steven Ditschler.

Produce sales, creativity for participants

Life Opportunities participant Jennifer Richard has her own tomato plant near the extensive garden outside the Life Opportunities location in Hudson.

Participants here care for and sell vegetables to the public. The proceeds are used for special activities during the day, explains Program Coordinator Margaret Christensen.

PERSISTENCE NEEDED FOR FULL-TIME JOB

Zach Stewart works the night shift at Walmart in Red Wing, unloading trucks and stocking grocery items.

A crew of seven, many of them moving back and forth along a collapsible roller system, pulls a 3,000 piece shipment from a semi trailer at Walmart in Red Wing. Zach Stewart is on the team.

As one receiving supported employment services from ProAct, the full-timer is in a fast paced environment that is mentally demanding, explains ProAct job developer and coach Sam Kapala.

"We keep him motivated, because I keep pushing the line," said Walmart Warehouse Manager Ardis Radke.

Stewart is no stranger to work, having served with a grounds maintenance company in the Twin Cities, where he did mowing and snow shoveling. He likes the stocking tasks here, and operates in four different departments.

He applied for the job on his own, and was hired within two weeks of starting at ProAct. The nonprofit provides supported employment services.

For the truck unload, Kapala reminds Stewart about the boxes, to check the arrows which determine the orientation. So much of confidence is mental, Kapala said. It's a factor he learned in youth sports and rings true in the vocational world, as well.

Stacking boxes of many shapes and sizes on the correct pallets is the main focus with the unload. Kapala compares it to Tetris, a popular game.

"Zach, you're getting really good at stacking these boxes," says Kapala "I know," Stewart responds.

Always a chuckle, and hands to help out

Utility man Bob Furchner has been around the block a few times, primarily as a mailman, and he always has a smile and friendly word for others.

Maintenance is his main job at ProAct in Red Wing, but he also operates a bus and a forklift and displays a sense of humor.

"I'll be driving along and I start laughing because I see something I feel is humorous. They ask me, 'Why are you laughing?' I tell them, it's just me."

Furchner will walk through the facility and, if he's not on a really tight mission and someone calls out to him, he stops to talk. "That's what I used to do at the post office." Furchner said he truly enjoys the participants.

His earlier background included home remodeling and construction, after a short stint in the military. ProAct initially hired him for a cleaning crew, and his tasks progressed from there.

From checking a problematic public address system to diagnosing bus problems, tearing down and moving large racks and spotting sand hill cranes on an early morning Wisconsin bus route, variety is everywhere in this role. Furchner lives partly in the shadow of veteran Plant Manager Craig Olson, while jumping from place to place to help departments. Some smaller jobs are done immediately upon request. "Whatever happens, if it lands on my plate, I deal with it."

Bob Furchner spent 30 years as a mail carrier in Red Wing before retiring and listening to his neighbor, Production Manager Jim Bohmbach, who asked him to apply.

Banquets to recognize achievements

Red Wing/Hudson/Zumbrota– October 7
Treasure Island, Red Wing

Eagan–
September 30
Envision Event Center, Oakdale

TRAINING UP FRONT, CARING FOR OTHERS

Sometimes the job training opportunities are right there for the taking, and Carrie Lane in Red Wing has found the best of both worlds performing secretarial functions in the ProAct office area.

Support from her designated coordinator is literally down the hall and the facility offers a variety of tasks, with people interaction being her favorite.

"They're very kind in helping me," said Lane. "To learn these new experiences is wonderful."

Designated Coordinator Lisa Richardson said Lane presents herself very well, and is a great face for ProAct when people first walk in. She's professional and pleasant, and always has a smile. Her comfort level with people is obvious.

Lane previously worked at an apple orchard, and with in-home nursing for patients who were terminal.

Paperwork often requires that she be in the back office, but she welcomes new assignments. "The back gets kind of lonely," she said. Others have noticed how caring she is, tending to people up front who need more time.

Dressing the part, figuring out who is connected to who and what people are coming in for are the aspects she thrives on. "I like the challenge of having to remember," she said. "That's why I'm here."

Carrie Lane calls for an eRecycling drop off for a visitor, who had VCRs and a television to dispose of. After laughing together, the woman gave an extra donation to ProAct's work.

Whether it's a mother picking up her daughter, an eRecycling delivery, a social worker or other visitor, Lane makes contacts and coordinates the visit.

Richardson said people with and without disabilities are very comfortable with her. Lane's confidence is increasing and the end goal is to find an administrative position.

What's the dream job? "I guess this– to do something like this for the Mayo Clinic."

100 DAYS ACCIDENT FREE IN EAGAN

Staff members in Eagan were recognized at a donut breakfast on July 13 for 100 days of accident free operation.

Participants from all departments and nine staffers make up Eagan's Safety Committee, which is chaired by Stephanie Skordahl, building and grounds coordinator.

The group reminds staff and participants that safey is everyone's job, every day, and had earlier distributed cards with that message.

Small town stability, from page 1

more. When they started out last year, the orders were huge and overwhelming, but little by little, the crew kept at it, said Site Supervisor Jim Bergeson. Quality over quantity is the goal. There can be no bubbles or wrinkles in the labels.

The coordinator said some were hesitant to go to the job site, at first, but once they went, they loved it. "Some wanted to give it a try and work as much as they can once they got a paycheck." When substitutes are needed, ProAct pulls from it's Red Wing participants to meet CWD's needs.

Bar codes are applied to products and labels on boxes. Items are removed from bags and boxes and repackaged. There are water filters for coffee makers, refrigerators, and other uses and air filters, as well. Site Supervisor Jim Bergeson said there are high standards, and the crew has met them.

Many are talking about the company's announced move to a closed ALCO variety store down the street.

A pretty prairie view and much work to do are the regular routine for Jen Speikers, left, and Melodie Davis at Commercial Water Distributing in Zumbrota.

TEMP EXPERIENCE TURNS INTO JOB

A TV monitor in the laundry room just behind the front desk at a Comfort Suites hotel allows the front desk manager to watch for and go meet guests, but sometimes it's just too busy to do both jobs.

Comfort Suites Front Desk Manager Kim Nysven, left, receives some needed help with laundry tasks from Crystal Katelhut.

That's where Crystal Katelhut comes in to make sure the steady stream of guests have clean sheets. Two large washers run almost continually. With 33 guest checkouts on this day, the sheets will start coming down, explains ProAct job developer and coach Traci Kolo.

ProAct arranged for a temporary work experience for Katelhut at the Hudson hotel, and the business then hired her part-time. The part-timer said many of her tasks are favorites. Hudson is a busy town, with sporting events, a strong business base and other travelers, Kolo explains.

Working closely with Kolo, Katelhut has gradually needed less job coaching and relies on more natural supports provided by the employer.

Kolo created shelf tags and a folding guide with details about each function Katelhut performs. The pictures make it much easier to identify tasks and their order.

"She really likes working here, and helps everybody else," said Comfort Suites General Manager Ron Theis. Unemployment is low in Hudson, he explains, perhaps at 1 percent.

As businesses compete to find employees, Katelhut is also competing in the sporting world of Special Olympics. She participates in state track and field events and plays softball.

BOARD VETERAN SAYS CHALLENGES AHEAD

With two decades of service on the ProAct board of directors, Marty Stapleton was elected to another term, and continues to enjoy working on maintaining and growing ProAct.

"There's been a lot of improvement from the time when I started," he said. "We were housed in a little facility on Highway 13 in Eagan." A new building in the late 1990s and merger with a similar program in Red Wing were followed by the addition of a Hudson, Wis. location in 2009. With growth, comes challenges.

Marty Stapleton

The emphasis on in-center facilities for people with disabilities is lessening, and funding cuts are always being discussed, he explained. The idea is to get all clients into jobs offsite. Stapleton said that focus presents a twofold problem. First, some of ProAct's clients are not able to work independently. Secondly, many are not eager to go offsite for employment.

"When they come to a facility like ours, the people they know, their friends are here," he said. "They are still challenged to do work ... and they feel comfortable." Stapleton said the current system needs to be maintained for these individuals.

In full-time retirement for two years, Stapleton was a career lawyer who found ProAct through Mendakota Country Club, where he served on the board. A fellow board member worked for ProAct's predecessor, Owobopte.

While ProAct's current board has a mix of financial and manufacturing people, a parent of a client and two lawyers, he said the group shares the same views about the nonprofit's mission. Where they differ is in the skill sets they bring to help meet the challenges and make sure ProAct's clients are succeeding to the best of their ability, he explained.

The group has been tracking a revamped information technology approach for the organization, and has been faced with a number of statistical and regulatory hurdles. It ultimately takes someone like CEO Steven Ditschler and his staff to fully understand the requirements, he explained. "It never ceases to amaze me, the job that staff does. I think they really deserve a pat on the back," he said.

Stapleton urges people to take time out for the ProAct Golf Classic, a longstanding tradition and fun event. "It brings a lot of people together who are involved with ProAct- customers and supporters, and that's good."

Comments welcome, alternative formats available– *Upon request, this publication is available in alternate languages and formats. Comments are welcome. Contact Melinda Lien at 651-289-3149, mlien@proactinc.org.*

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Programs funded in part by The Greater Twin Cities United Way, United Way of Goodhue, Wabasha & Pierce Counties and United Way of Hastings.

ProAct, Inc. is a 501(c)(3) not-for-profit organization with more than 40 years of experience.

Disability programs report 77 percent working

A survey of Minnesota organizations like ProAct found that 77 percent of the people with disabilities they serve are employed.

The survey was performed on behalf of the Minnesota Organization for Habilitation and Rehabilitation (MOHR), where ProAct is a member along with more than 100 similar programs.

"Minnesota's providers of training and employment services for people with disabilities put more people in jobs than any other source of work, while offering the greatest range of choices," according to MOHR.

Among the 77 percent of people served by responding MOHR member organizations, a majority of those employed were working in the community. "MOHR providers play a crucial role in the employment of Minnesotans with disabilities," said MOHR President Mike Burke.

Citing the fact that the jobless rate among people with disabilities who want to work is at least twice that of the general population, Burke said "it is hard to imagine how dire a situation we would have if the services member organizations provide were not available."

The survey, conducted by MarketResponse International of Minneapolis, indicated that among the 9,396 day program participants working, 43 percent were in jobs in-center, while 57 percent were employed in the community. Approximately a third of those in the community were individual job placements and two-thirds were part of work crews or enclaves.

"People with disabilities should have the opportunity to pursue their living, life enrichment and work goals, and they should have the ability to make their own choices," said Burke. "Some wish to be hired directly by the employer, others want to be part of a work crew, while some prefer center-based programs. These are choices that should be available, and honored."

In the survey, 70 of the organization's 110 provider members responded, and they were drawn from all areas of the state, with the highest numbers of programs represented in MOHR's Metropolitan and South West regions.

MOTIVATED WORKERS FILL BBQ CO NEED

He came up with the idea for his business by accident, but he was very intentional about hiring people with disabilities to help out.

"We didn't really have a plan, we were just going to make it work," said A-MAZE-N Products co-owner Todd Johnson. The company creates and packages barbecue grill accessories to add smoke flavor to meat cooked on regular grills.

A ProAct crew at A-MAZE-N Barbecue Products in Eagan has made a believer out of the firm's owner, Todd Johnson. Clockwise from bottom left are Tammy Truong, Supervisor Kam Mcphillips and Minh Hai.

Johnson had used temporary workers before, and has found that the crew from ProAct easily outworks them.

"They want to be here, and they're not worrying about a cell phone or cigarette break," he said. The owner has taken note of the group's strong family relationships and great support from ProAct. The crew has figured out smarter, faster ways to do the work, as well. Johnson said he feels strongly that people with disabilities are the most underutilized labor force out there. "These guys want to come to work be successful, they want to perform."

A-MAZE-N is on its third location, near LaFonda de Los Lobos restaurant in Eagan, and plans to take some space next door to accommodate business growth.

Pellets for grill smoking are purchased in bulk and repackaged, manuals are inserted, boxes are made and then palletized. The ProAct crew is included in some work decisions, and regular cookouts on Fridays.

There are times when people can get burned out on a task and need to switch to something else, the owner explains.

Communication and consistency are high on Johnson's list of priorities. Problems are worked out quickly.

With the smoker products, Johnson says traditional meat smoking can take an entire day, but this idea simplifies the process and greatly reduces the time needed.