



Everyday Lives

The principle of living everyday lives is to promote individual choice and the basic rights of individuals to live the life of their choosing. Prospectus Berco supports individuals on their life journey to ensure that they are afforded the same freedoms that you and I enjoy in our everyday lives. Chris Ritter is a 33-year-old young man who has been a Production Worker in the Prospectus Berco Vocational Program for nine years. Chris graduated from Kutztown Area High School and The Berks County

Career and Technology Center-East Campus. Chris still remembers his first job working in the Vocational Program; he helped to package chains for shipment. His favorite job is packaging weather strips, where he separates them and rolls them into a spiral before putting them into a plastic sleeve with a label for shipment. Chris has learned a lot in the Vocational Program and appreciates the vast experiences and opportunities he has had through the program. "I *Continued on page 3*

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Executive Director's Message

Every Voice Counts

"...systematic underfunding of services has been a consistent theme preventing providers from paying living wages to their Direct Support Professionals..." Jody Wagner *Continued on page 5*

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WELCOME JAMES



Prospectus Berco welcomes James Bonner to the leadership team. He will serve as the new Human Resources Administrator and is happy to be working with Prospectus Berco. He likes that, “it doesn’t feel like a large company. It is more like a community,” he said.

James hails from Springfield, Delaware County and is currently living with his wife and two children in Schwenksville. He graduated from the University of Scranton with a Bachelor of Science in biology and went on to receive his master’s degree in Instructional Leadership from Neumann University. James was a special education teacher for an emotional support classroom for many years. While teaching he went on to receive a graduate certification for business administration from West Chester University which helped him transition from special education into the human resources field. James has been in the human resources field for 10 years working in long-term care and healthcare industries. James said that he enjoys human resources because he can adapt the skills he used as an instructor to help people achieve their career goals. “I like to connect the dots. Connect the leadership with the workers, motivate the teams, and get the job done,” he said. “I enjoy supporting that whole process,” he added.

His personal goals are for “positivity and productivity.” James said, “by exhibiting these qualities myself, I firmly believe that others will embrace these qualities as well.” So far, the culture and values of the corporation have made an impression on him. He is looking forward to The ACT Formula training that all employees go through. The ACT Formula is Accountability, Communication, and Trust. “It is more than just a sign on the wall. It is something that we need to live by,” he said. As the Human Resources Administrator, he will support the corporation in aligning the leadership with its goals and objectives.

When James is not working, he enjoys sustainable, regenerative farming and is a member of the Pennsylvania Association of Sustainable Agriculture (PASA). He has several acres that he gardens in addition to supporting the local agricultural community by visiting local farmers markets. He jokingly said, “If you don’t see me in my flannel at work, you will see me in my flannel at home gardening.” ■

(Continued from page 1.)



enjoy learning new things,” he said. He was excited about a new job that he did this past week with LED strips and sealing them. Chris goes to Sweet Street Desserts as part of a small work team, where he works alongside workers to perform a wide range of tasks that include breaking down packages for customized shipments, peeling bananas, and washing down trays. Above, Chris is packaging cupcake liners for a company in Florida. Chris aspires to secure a competitive job close to home.

When Chris isn't working, he enjoys participating in sports activities. He is a longtime member of the Miracle League of Lehigh Valley. Chris competes against other teams in the baseball league, where you can find him manning third base. He is also an avid golfer. Recently he placed first in the May Special Olympics golf tournament. He and his father led the Little People Tournament for several years. Father and son look forward to participating in the Prospectus Berco 29th Annual Golf Tournament on July 24th at Moselem Springs Golf Club. They have been playing in the tournament for the past couple of years. Chris also enjoys classic cars and was proud to show up at the golf tournament with his father in a 1968 Camaro. Other things you should know about Chris? He said, "I like to talk. I talk a lot," he says with a chuckle. ■

MEMORIALS

Funzo Belk, Sr. passed away on May 10, 2023. Funzo retired in March 2017 after 25 years of dedicated service to Prospectus Berco as a Direct Support Professional in one of our community homes. Despite working the awake night position for 15 years, Funzo made a huge impression on the individuals in the home; they all knew and loved him. People used to tease him that in addition to his two children, he had three more sons who were residents of the community home. Prospectus Berco was a very important part of Funzo's life. He was an avid Dallas Cowboys fan and always sported some type of memorabilia to broadcast his affinity for his favorite football team. Funzo was married to Claudia Davis and had two children and eight grandchildren.

Mae A. Bowers of Reading, passed away on April 17, 2023. She was the wife of the late Douglas Bowers. Together they had five children, several grandchildren, and great grandchildren. Mae worked as a Direct Support Professional before transferring to a fiscal clerical position in the corporate offices. Mae was very likable and would do anything she could to help the office staff. No job was too small or too big.

Frederick W. Wolf, Sr. of Wernersville passed away on March 26, 2023 at the age of 93. He was predeceased by his son Frederick Wolf, Jr., and wife Mary Jane who he was married to for 69 years. Fred and his wife were longtime supporters of Prospectus Berco. The Wolfs established the Prospectus Berco Endowment Fund to ensure that Prospectus Berco services would be available for future generations of adults with disabilities. Having a son with disabilities, Fred and Mary Jane knew firsthand how important Prospectus Berco services are to individuals who need additional supports to live meaningful lives in our community. The Wolfs' legacy will continue to impact the lives of individuals for many years to come. ■

FORTY-FIVE YEARS of SERVICE



During the April Town Hall meeting, employees surprised Jody Wagner with a special recognition of her 45 years of service with Prospectus Berco. She served as the Executive Director for 28 of those years, having worked her way up from a Program Director in Day Services. Today, Prospectus Berco is a prominent service provider in Berks County thanks to her dedication and leadership. She is a true champion for people with disabilities. Employees celebrated this significant milestone by raining her with a card shower, cake, and a white sapphire earring and necklace set. ■

EVERY JOB COUNTS: SAVE MY JOB

“Individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities should have the right to choose a workplace that provides them with a safe environment, and the accommodations they need to be successful.”



Avis is one of approximately 52 Production Workers in the Vocational Program. She is breaking down 50-pound bags of biscuit mix into one-pound bags for a local business.

Many adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities will be displaced from work with the passing of the proposed Bob Casey *Transformation to Competitive Integrated Employment Act*. To be clear, Prospectus Berco fully supports the individual's right to realize their full potential and to seek competitive employment. In fact, Prospectus Berco embraces the Employment First initiative and has an Employment program to assist individuals in obtaining and maintaining gainful employment in the community. However, it is unrealistic to assume that all individuals with disabilities are the same and need the same types of support; not everyone will be successful in obtaining competitive employment. 14(c)

programs, also known as Commensurate Work Programs, offer individuals an alternative for meaningful work in an environment that supports them. It is our position that it should be the person's right to choose the employment program that matches their ability and fosters an environment for growth and development. By eliminating 14(c) programs, people with disabilities will no longer have the right to choose a program that supports them in being employed. Individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities should have the right to choose a workplace that provides them with a safe environment, and the accommodations they need to be successful.

A Few Facts About Commensurate Work Programs

Presented by the Coalition for the Preservation of Employment Choice

- *Providers offering these services are referred to as Vocational/Employment/Home and Community-Based providers for individuals w/intellectual and developmental disabilities (I/DD).*
- *Providers offer a range of facility-based and community-based services to individuals with I/DD, including Community Integrated Employment Services (CIE).*
- *Facility-based services often offer employment opportunities under the federal 14(c) wage program (Section 14(c) of the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA)]. These providers have in many cases obtained competitive employment opportunities for individuals with I/DD from community businesses to allow for this work.*
- *The federal 14(c) rule allows specific, qualified, provider/employers to pay individuals with significantly lower productivity due to their disability less than the prevailing minimum wage for work, based upon a set of highly regulated protocols, which is called a commensurate wage.*
- *This amount earned is not simply “sub-minimum” wages, which is an incomplete and some times inaccurate description; rather it represents a portion of wage specifically measured under a formula based on productivity and other standards. Individuals can actually earn more than minimum wage under the program.*
- *These providers offer a safe environment, with professional staffing, to allow individuals to thrive in an employment setting, work with their peers and others, and receive a paycheck.*
- *As mentioned, these programs have historically been referred to as “sheltered workshops,” but that is an antiquated term that does not adequately describe the support provided for these individuals nor the environment they are in. These programs are essentially providing broad-based accommodations and supports to facilitate a work environment where employees with I/DD can gain skills and be successful.*
- *The programs also provide training to allow individuals to move on to competitive, community employment where possible.*

Read the full report on our Advocacy page at prospectusberco.org



SUPPORT ME, SUPPORT MY DSP

Message from Jody Wagner, Executive Director / CEO

Our providers group, PAR, Pennsylvania Advocacy and Resources for Autism and Intellectual Disability, conducted a survey of 130 Pennsylvania providers representing over 30,000 people living with intellectual disabilities and autism. What they learned is that our system is in crisis. Thirty-four percent (34%) of service providers have permanently closed their programs with 92% of those closed programs being Community Participation Services in facility and community-based settings. The primary reason for those closures, 88%, is staffing shortages with a secondary reason for 65% of those programs closed being insufficient fee rate schedules. Another 62% of providers have reduced the number of individuals being served. This critical reduction in programs and capacity of existing programs has resulted in more than 4,000 individuals losing services and a growing waiting list of more than 12,000 persons in need of services.

Since before the COVID-19 pandemic, systematic underfunding of services has been a consistent theme preventing providers from

paying living wages to their Direct Support Professionals (DSP). DSPs work weekends, evenings, overnight, and overtime to ensure individuals receiving services are safe and healthy and leading meaningful lives. However, DSP turnover is approaching 40% with 1 in 4 vacant positions statewide. We need your help to advocate with Governor Shapiro and your local legislators for increased funding and other positive changes in the system.

At a minimum, we are urging Governor Shapiro and lawmakers to appropriate \$430 million so that providers can pay competitive and ultimately living wages to DSPs to provide needed supports and services. We also continue to pursue regulatory and policy changes that would improve the system and work life of the DSPs doing this critical work. How can you help? Go to our website, Prospectusberco.org, to the *How to Help* dropdown, and click on *Advocate*. By scrolling down to the yellow buttons and clicking on the PAR Action Center, you will be able to send a letter to the Governor and your legislators urging their support

(Zyrah Smith, DSP and Charlie Adult Training participant.)



of the increased funding. There is even a section on the letter for you to share your story, why you are passionate about increased funding to address DSP staffing shortages and other positive changes in the service delivery system. Finally, I encourage you to also share this link with your friends and family so that we have many voices supporting the needed investment in the Intellectual Disability/Autism system in Pennsylvania.



Unmasked and loving it!



Look at these pearly whites! Program Supervisor Lisa Michalowski is enjoying an outing to Boehringer's Drive-in for sunshine and sprinkles, while Charles (above right) is getting charged up for the outing. Pictured right is Amanda with her friends Joe and Wendy.

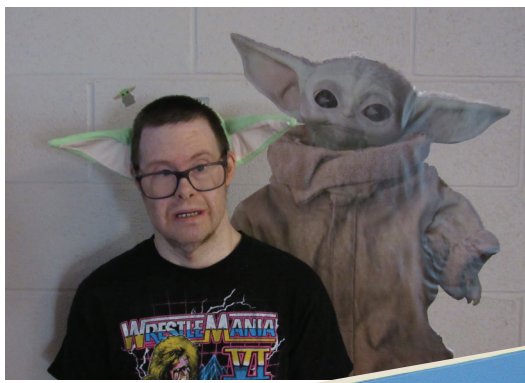


(Pictured far left, second from left) Jereck made some new friends recently while attending the 76ers playoff game against the Boston Celtics at the Wells Fargo Center in Philadelphia. As you can see, Jereck had a great time.

Best Wishes!

Marquise Winston, a medical student at Drexel University, completed his Health Practicum with Prospectus Berco by shadowing the Medical Support Team. He accompanied participants on doctor appointments and visited with them in their programs. He believes the experience will help him communicate more effectively with people of all abilities. Pictured with Marquise is Daijah Davis, RN, Health Services Specialist.





The Force was with us as we took a break from the regular routine to celebrate the Star Wars Anniversary on May 4th. In addition to having a photo booth and dressing up, we had a movie showing of this iconic classic. Pictured above left to right are Alan, Robert, Arden, Lydia, Joe, and DSP Marylou Ramos with Julio. Left is the Vocational Team, back row left to right are Mark, Marilyn, Jereck, Mark, and Dereck. Front row left to right is Jose, Kelcie, Amy, and Vicky.

Everyday People

Employment Specialist Afiyo Awouya, preps Jose for a job interview. Good luck Jose!



In addition to delivering hundreds of meals to senior citizens, participants volunteer for Berks Encore and do grocery shopping for seniors. Pictured left to right are Angel, Brian, DSP Sabrina Aponte, and Isaac.



Having Fun

Employees and program participants ended the 45th Anniversary Year with a 77's Dance Party. The celebration included a Time Capsule with an assortment of items and memorabilia that people assembled to be dug up at a future date. Compliance Director Donna Trexler and Maintenance Team member, Tim Seidel had the honor of burying the capsule.



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