

Preparing for takeoff in the working world

Arc Jacksonville launches space-themed 'Job-a-Palooza' for group of students

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Nick Early reads a call center script under the guidance of Stephen Rutkowski from Guidewell Connect, the systems support provider for Florida Blue. They were taking part in Friday's Job-a-Palooza at the Schultz Center. Several businesses teamed up with 60 students from The Arc Jacksonville with intellectual and developmental differences to try their hand at work-related tasks. [BOB SELF/FLORIDA TIMES-UNION]

Businesses teamed Friday to provide students with intellectual and developmental differences the chance to shine and prepare for takeoff into the working world.

A dozen businesses and six schools participated in The Arc Jacksonville's second Job-a-Palooza for students aged 14 through 21. Each business set up a work station at the Schultz Center where the students competed and performed job-related tasks as accurately and quickly as possible.

Emcee Brent Martineau, sports director for Action News Jax, announced the beginning and ending of each round, which were named astronaut, earth, sun, telescope and spaceship. An astronaut cutout also was stationed in the back of the room.

“This is a good way to know what’s out there for people like me,” said Eric Lowry,

19. “It helps people find jobs and the skills that they need for jobs, and it’s very helpful for me to become more independent.”

The preparation process took several months of planning and collaboration between all of the departments in The Arc Jacksonville. Thirty mentors for the students were recruited from both The Arc and AmeriCorps to help guide students at the event.

Teachers from the participating schools and other staff members were also there to see the magic happen.

The event was cosponsored by the Florida Division of Vocational Rehabilitation, a federal-state program dedicated to assisting those with intellectual and development differences to acquire and keep career opportunities.

Jim Whittaker, president and CEO of The Arc, said this event is not only a great way to have students sign up for Vocational Rehabilitation services, but a way to connect people from diverse backgrounds in the working world as well.

“It’s all about connecting people and building those relationships. It’s not unwillingness that is getting in the way. Business leaders just haven’t had the exposure,” Whittaker said. “What we have found is that when employers hire people with differences, it brings something new to the company and boosts morale with other employees in the company. Typically, the employees will rally around their new friend.”

The marketing and community engagement arm of VyStar Credit Union had a table at Job-a-Palooza where students could fill small zip-up bags with branded phone stickers, chap-stick, spray sanitizer, packages with money plant seeds and other company items.

The objective was for students to fill the bags as quickly as possible in order to work motor skill development and perform in a fast-paced environment.

Robbie Culliton, a graduate from The Arc’s On Campus Transition College Experience Program at the University of North Florida, was recently hired as a tower host for VyStar. He is also a resident of The Arc Jacksonville Village, which is an independent-living, apartment-style neighborhood for adults with intellectual and developmental differences.

Kaci Honeycutt, the community liaison for VyStar, said the event was fulfilling to be a part of because of the excitement and determination the students brought to the table. She said watching the joy they got in the activity was a privilege knowing that they were able to feel a sense of accomplishment.

“It’s easy to support what they do,” Honeycutt said of The Arc.

The morning ended with each company awarding a student who excelled in their activities.

The Arc Jacksonville is hoping to bring Job-a-Palooza back next year and to make it an annual event to continue its mission of incorporating these students into the working society and to help actualize their career dreams.

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George Oldrock slaps hands with Aimee Becker, an AmeriCorps volunteer, after he completed sorting silverware and loading cups into a dishwashing tray at European Street's tables. [PHOTOS BY BOB SELF/FLORIDA TIMES-UNION]



Ward Lariscy, owner of an interior design business, instructs Justin Dial as he sorts and folds fabric samples during The Arc's Job-a-Palooza.