

# Celebrate employers of special-needs people

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**Tower host Robbie Culliton cleans off a whiteboard in the lounge of the VyStar Credit Union headquarters in downtown Jacksonville. Culliton is part of the new Shopability campaign that showcases local businesses that hire people who have intellectual and developmental differences. BOB SELF/FLORIDA TIMES-UNION**

Robbie Culliton might be the first person people see when they enter the lobby of the VyStar Credit Union's headquarters building in downtown Jacksonville.

He also might be the first person VyStar employees see when they head to staff lounges for lunch or a work break in the game room, both of which he maintains and cleans.

As "tower host," he greets everyone with a smile and, during the pandemic, possibly an elbow bump. And if they have time to chat, he talks sports, music or whatever else they want to discuss.

Culliton, 25, and fellow VyStar special-needs employee Kelly Suddath are part of a new campaign called Shopability that showcases local businesses that employ individuals with autism, Down syndrome and other intellectual and developmental differences.



**Weaver**



**Wolfburg**

“One of my favorite parts of my job is talking to my co-workers,” he said. “I’ve learned how to interact and socialize with more people. It has definitely been a great experience.”

“For someone with special needs, it makes me feel good because I have a job like everyone else,” he said. “I like that VyStar hires people with all abilities.”

The Shopability campaign includes a searchable, interactive map that identifies about 125 “IDD-inclusive”

businesses in the area. These employers include “uniquely abled individuals on their teams” through employment, internships or serving as a job site in partnership with a nonprofit.

The map will be the heart of “Shop-ability Saturday” on March 6, a citywide celebration encouraging the public to support those businesses.

Shopability is a spinoff of a 2017 public awareness campaign called Connectable that focused on the ability of people like Culliton rather than their disability. Connectable was the brainchild of Jacksonville philanthropist Delores Barr Weaver, who has financially supported many nonprofits that serve special-needs populations.

“Nothing is more empowering than the opportunity to be a productive citizen,” said Weaver, who funded both campaigns. “Shopability highlights those businesses that opened the door to our neighbors and friends with intellectual and developmental differences, resulting in a win-win relationship for both the employer and the employee. I salute these forward thinkers and hope others will grant similar opportunities.”

VyStar worked with The Arc Jacksonville, a nonprofit that serves special-needs people, to employ Culliton and newly hired Suddath, a mail-room and supply clerk.

“I can bring to my employer that I am a friendly and kind person and a good listener and I try to be there for people,” Suddath said. “It is important to include people with all abilities because they bring different things to the table ... It’s important for everyone to have a job.”

VyStar President and CEO Brian Wolfburg said hiring special-needs employees is part of the credit union’s ongoing commitment to support its Northeast Florida base.

“It is extremely important to ... VyStar as a whole that every individual in this community has the ability to work and earn an income as part of an organization in Northeast Florida,” he said. “This campaign is just one more way we connect with our community.”

The idea for Shopability was born when Jacksonville University geography professor Ashley Johnson asked her students to perform a service-learning project for Connectable, said director Sarah Troup. The end result was a map of IDD-inclusive businesses.

“We based our Shopability map on their prototype and elevated it to a communitywide campaign,” she said. “COVID-19 put a strain on many businesses, so the timing is perfect to give back to the employers that have been inclusive of the IDD community for so long. We do not need to gather in crowds to celebrate Shopability Saturday, and we can pivot to curbside pick-up if needed.”

The number of businesses on the map likely will increase as the campaign goes public.

“We know there are more out there. We are asking for the community’s help in identifying all of Jacksonville’s IDDinclusive employers and listing them,” she said.

Some business owners are initially uneasy about special-needs hires, having “a fear of the unknown for those who don’t know someone with an IDD or aren’t sure how they could fit into their organization,” Troup said. But they are typically glad they did make the hire.



**Mailroom supply clerk Kelly Suddath loads outgoing envelopes into a machine that puts postage on them and seals them in the mailroom of the VyStar Credit Union headquarters building in downtown Jacksonville. Suddath is one of two VyStar employees with intellectual and developmental differences. BOB SELF/FLORIDA TIMES-UNION**

“Their response is often the same, ‘I wish I would have made the decision sooner. Bringing someone on our team was one of the best decisions I’ve made,’” she said. “Employment not only gives people with IDDs an opportunity to experience the fulfillment of a job well-done, research shows it makes our workplaces better too.”

Having a prominent business like VyStar participating is a boost to the campaign.

“The fact that VyStar employed Robbie last year and as a result of the positive experience decided to bring another employee on board speaks volumes to Robbie’s — and now Kelly’s — value and contribution in the

workplace,” Troup said. “I hope businesses will look to VyStar and see how well inclusive employment can work out for an organization.

“When I see people with IDD in the workplace, I know that there is a shift in our culture toward greater acceptance and inclusion,” she said.

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Sarah Troup Director of ConnectableJax