

Grafton High School Adult Students Benefitting Community Businesses

By Mary Romaniec, Reporter

Brendan Griffin showed up exactly at 9:30 a.m. to begin the next couple of hours working at Pepperoni Express. Like any other employee he knew to walk through the back door, put down his jacket and pick up the supplies needed to begin his tasks. Moving around cleaning the restaurant in rhythmic fashion, determined to be thorough, Griffin is clearly in his element.

“Brendan is one of my best workers,” says Lakis “Lucky” Theoharis, owner of Pepperoni Express. “He adjusted right away to the job. He takes the initiative and does things without me telling him.” As if on cue, Griffin heads to the back to bring out the drinks to stock in the cooler. Later he begins folding pizza boxes to be used for the day’s orders.

What makes Griffin remarkable is that he is working with job coach Kelli DeRosiers through Grafton High School to learn a variety of job skills that will be used for paid employment at a later date. For now, his payment is \$10 a week plus free pizza, soda and a chance to do something he really enjoys.

“I like working here because I get good experience,” says Griffin. Pepperoni Express is just one of the many places Griffin has worked as part of a program through the high school for students age 18 to 22 years old who qualify for the job skills program. The program includes teaching life skills, job etiquette and a variety of tasks that will be used when they become employed after they leave the program.

Officially known as a Vocational Coordinator, DeRosiers laughs easily with Griffin while talking about all of the places he has worked including The Curtain Factory in Rockdale, the Salvation Army in Uxbridge, the Whitinsville Community Center and Blackstone Valley Fitness, both in Whitinsville. Naturally athletic, Griffin likes it when a business allows him to keep busy. One of his favorite places to work so far has been Houlden Farms in North Grafton. Asked what all he did there, he simply replied, “Farming.”

These are internship positions for the time being, collectively adding up to real skills that benefit both the student and the businesses. The biggest surprise so far seems to be from the businesses who are participating by allowing students to work for them either on site or indirectly at the high school with a variety of tasks.

Explained Dr. Emily McCobb, Director of Shelter Medicine at Tufts Cummings School of Veterinary Medicine, “We are getting work done that we would not ordinarily get done,” in response to how the program of job coached students have benefited the Lerner Spay and Neuter Clinic.

For the past two years, Lexi Dauphinais has been a staple at the clinic where she works two days a week for several hours doing a myriad of tasks like cleaning cages, arranging drapes for cat surgery and laundry. Her reward is to be among animals, something she loves, just as she seems to really enjoy being with the staff at Tufts.

Arriving with Vocational Coordinator Theresa Monteith, Dauphinais begins her day sitting at a table folding the drapes that will be used for the feral cat clinic Tufts holds once a month. Dauphinais has a list of things that need to be done and she knows exactly how to do these tasks.

Added Monteith, “It helps the community by connecting our students to real job skills. We try to expose them to new experiences to find their strengths. This will later lead to jobs that may be paying positions when they leave our program. The bottom line is we try hard to create independence. The jobs and skills are theirs to do.”

There is something about Dauphinais that resonates with the staff at Tufts. Maybe it is the animal lover in her, or that she is so willing to work on tasks that are time consuming but still necessary. Or that she shows up with a cheery attitude even on cold mornings. In the end it could also be that Dauphinais is genuine in her delight to be do-

ing what she does for Tufts.

Because the clinic is also a teaching hospital, college students are required to spay two dogs while at Tufts. As McCobb emphasized the duality of Tuft’s mission of teaching students and helping animals, she couldn’t help muse over the effectiveness of having the vocational students from Grafton High School handle certain tasks.

She maintains that the doctors and college students now have their time freed up in order to focus on where they are needed most. As if to demonstrate, she then heads back to



Brendan Griffin with “Lucky” Theoharis at Pepperoni Express.



Lexi Dauphinais with Dr. Emily McCobb and resident dog, Turtle, at Tufts Cummings Veterinary School.



Aaron Bissell and Lisa Scarlett of Apple Tree Arts in front of one of their production work areas.

Scarlett. It’s banter between them that is fun and easy.

Dressed in business casual with a suit jacket, white shirt and jeans, Bissell said that he’s been in theater since he was six years old. At Apple Tree Arts, Bissell has a niche for finding costumes and ideas online. He’s on the computer a lot looking up various items that Scarlett will ask him to find.

Recently he’s become involved in understanding how casting is determined. Bissell asks a lot of questions about the production process and then works on how he can benefit the next production at Scarlett’s direction. Next up, a play from one of Bissell’s favorite Disney stories—*The Jungle Book*.

Showing off the marquee he designed and made for one of the products, Doc Doc Goose, Bissell wishes he could continue to work at Apple Tree Arts. “I’ll do other things too,” he says.

His other favorite interest is horses. He volunteers at Hillside Stables in Grafton. Bringing his two interests together, Bissell wrote and produced a short film called “A Horse’s Love,” which was co-produced by his father, Richard, and shown on local cable TV on their show Rubber Duck Theater.

Other vocational students from Grafton High School have worked for Apple Tree Arts with their marketing program by helping with mailings and brochures and basic office needs. Director of Marketing Dana Wilson explained that these tasks are necessary for their annual fundraising and other business.

This is where the virtue of the vocational program broadens. The high school provides this program for businesses to connect with a variety of student skills including data entry, packaging, assembly,

making brochures, handling mailings and even child care. These services can be handled directly at the place of business or brought to the school for the students to complete. All of these services are free to participating companies or organizations.

The value to the students and businesses is symbiotic, explains DeRosiers. “Our students are willing to do anything if given a chance.” The goal then is to get more Grafton businesses to participate since these students are a part of the community.

Program Student Coordinator for the vocational program is Shawn Langevin, who commented on the plural benefits to the students and businesses. “While the students gain valuable skills and self-confidence for greater work independence, the businesses are getting quality work from an employee that is punctual every week, and of course the benefit to the community of being able to see our students as valuable members of the Grafton Community,” said Langevin.

Two years ago Brendan Griffin got his drivers license, and this year he got his first car. The aspirations from Griffin seem endless. His dream job would be to work in the hunting and fishing aisle of a sporting goods store. His other dream is to travel to places like Egypt, Germany and Australia. But for now it’s all about doing a good job with the task in front of him, which at the moment is folding pizza boxes at Pepperoni Express.

With a smile Lucky Theoharis nods in Griffin’s direction, “He is very motivated and willing to do anything. He’s happy to get something done.” Asked how he would like the program to expand, Langevin said “I would love to see the program here in Grafton grow in terms of the types of businesses and internships that the students are able to participate.”

For more information on the Vocational Program through Grafton High School contact Shawn Langevin at langevins@grafton.k12.ma.us or call the high school directly at (508) 839-5425.

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