



Milford Regional program helps young adults work past disabilities

By **Brian Benson/Daily News staff**

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MILFORD — When Alicia Carco started an internship at Milford Regional Medical Center this fall, she was worried about how she would adapt to the working world or if she would succeed.

Now, the 20-year-old Bellingham resident and Milford High graduate, who has a mood disorder, said she has developed math, social and organizational skills that will help her for the rest of her life.

"At first I didn't know what I was going to experience," said Carco, who works in the hospital's linen department, where she fills orders and organizes linens to be sent throughout the hospital. Now "I want to do this job. I like my co-workers."

Carco is one of six young adults with disabilities who are participating in Project Search, a one-year program that provides training through unpaid internships with the goal of giving students the social and career skills needed to find a job.

Students rotate through jobs in the hospital's linens, food service, mailroom/stockroom, clinical equipment and equipment sterilization departments.

"We absolutely love having them here," said Frank Saba, the hospital's CEO, who said the program helps the hospital go beyond its primary mission of providing acute care. "It's been a great collaboration, and we're delighted to be part of it."

Project Search organizers and interns gathered at the hospital yesterday to celebrate the program, a partnership between the hospital, Massachusetts Rehabilitation Commission, Milford Public Schools, Riverside Community Care, Franklin-based Horace Mann Educational Associates and UMass Medical School.

Project Search was started at a Cincinnati hospital 15 years ago and has grown to more than 150 sites in four countries.

Massachusetts did not have any programs until this year, when they were launched at Milford Regional and a Cape Cod hospital, said Don Hughes, an associate division director at Riverside Community Care who manages Riverside's Central Massachusetts Employment Collaborative.

"It's really an opportunity to give them some real-world work experience," Hughes said.

The program's goal is to help students succeed in any work environment and to ease the transition between high school and full-time work, he said.

Charles Carr, commissioner of the Massachusetts Rehabilitation Commission, said the program targets a critical age group. Young adults with disabilities may become dependent on Social Security and other government benefits for life if they cannot find work, he said.

"People with disabilities are the largest minority," Carr said. "This is a great intervention in their life."

Milford schools Superintendent Robert Tremblay said the program shows the importance of work experience for students with or without disabilities.

"It's a good lesson for (the district)," Tremblay said. "I thank you for providing this for us and leading the way."

Since she started in September, Carco has gone from a shy girl to someone who can interact with and working alongside co-workers who are not disabled, said her mother, Michelle Bonati.

"I cannot tell you how proud I am of my daughter," Bonati said. "Everyone has watched her come out of her shell."

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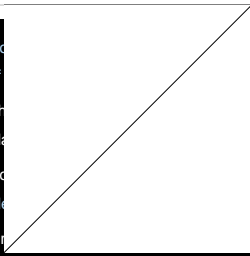
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