Finding My Purpose
by Kellie Wendland, Human Resources Director

As I approach my five year anniversary with ABC, I think about all of the opportunities ABC has given people with disabilities in Rochester. Yes, ABC benefits hundreds of participants every year, but sometimes we lose sight of what happens to the staff as an indirect result of the services we provide to our participants.

I came to ABC for the opportunity of a full time paycheck. I began as a job coach but, as I got to know our participants and our mission, I longed to be a program coordinator. Lucky for me, I got that opportunity six months into coaching.

After spending over a year as the School to Work Coordinator, I was given the opportunity to obtain a Master’s Degree with financial help from ABC. Without the financial help and support from ABC, I might not have furthered my education.

Then, after almost three years in that role, I was given the opportunity to interview for the Human Resources Director position.

ABC has not only provided me wonderful professional opportunities, but has also provided personal growth opportunities. I’ve changed during my years at ABC, as have the participants we serve. ABC provided me the opportunity to learn about a population with different needs and taught me to open my eyes to other needs in the community and in the world.

My work at ABC is no longer driven by only a paycheck, but an opportunity to make a difference in the lives of others on a daily basis. At ABC I have been given countless opportunities to advance my personal and professional life. Without my co-workers and the participants at ABC, I never would have developed into the right person for those opportunities. I am grateful to ABC, its staff and participants, and its mission for changing my life and helping me find my purpose.

ABC Joins Partner Organizations Calling for Direct Care Staffing Support

More than 60 staff and participants from Southeastern Minnesota organizations that work with persons with disabilities gathered March 14 at the Minnesota State Capitol in St. Paul to rally support for addressing the current direct care staffing crisis.

The visit was organized by MOHR-Minnesota with participants from ABC and other MOHR member organizations. The agencies were unified in support of the “Best Life Alliance,” currently being considered by Minnesota legislators in the form of SF 669 and HF 873.

These bills seek to improve compensation for direct care staff with a goal of filling some 8,700 vacant positions that now exist state-wide.

After attending a rally in the Capitol Rotunda, the group met with area legislators to discuss the current staffing crisis. Separate meetings were held with Representatives Tina Liebling, Duane Sauke and Nels Pierson as well as Senator Dave Senjem.

Many of these same organizations also held a joint press conference at ABC in late March to raise awareness of the staffing problem. We’re making our voices heard!

Expanded content available on-line at www.abcinc.org
On July 16, 1973, the life and perspective of Ironwood Springs founder Bob Bardwell changed forever. A construction accident left him paralyzed from the waist down, opening a new chapter in his life—one that has richly benefited persons with disabilities in our area. As Bob puts it, “instead of losing the use of my two legs, I gained 65 wheels.”

Inspired by fond memories of time spent at the Horn Creek Ranch in Colorado, Bob set out to foster a similar experience along the scenic Root River near Stewartville, Minnesota. With that, Ironwood Springs Christian Ranch was born.

Today Ironwood offers an inclusive, welcoming environment for everyone. It also has become a magnet for visitors with disabilities or special needs.

In the design of the facilities, Bob drew on his own experiences as a person with physical challenges to ensure that accessibility was at the forefront of all aspects of the visitor experience. Paved walkways lead to buildings equipped with wide doorways and ramps or elevators. Rooms are specifically designed for wheelchair access, with extra space between beds and bathrooms with roll-in showers. Recreational attractions such as a wheelchair-accessible mini golf course, rock wall and outdoor pool feature prominently in guest itineraries.

Now in its 31st year, Ironwood’s National Wheelchair Sports Camp in June is the largest event of its kind in the United States. Ironwood hosts a number of other special programs for persons with disabilities, such as a summer Wheelchair Family Camp and Adult ConnectAbilities Camps throughout the year. Recent initiatives have included “Operation Welcome Home,” retreats and programs specially designed for active duty, returning veterans and their families.

Breaking down barriers, pushing one’s comfort zone and growing through the process is a common theme across all Ironwood events. Whether it is riding a zip line, horseback riding or just contemplating the beauty of nature, Ironwood has now inspired generations of persons with physical and cognitive challenges.

The same is true regarding employment. Beginning in 1998, ABC crews have often been tasked with housekeeping duties for the cabins and lodges at Ironwood. Bob and his staff know first-hand what persons with disabilities can achieve when given the chance, so their decision to partner with ABC for staffing Ironwood came easily.

“We love having the ABC crew here at Ironwood Springs. They work hard to keep our visitors rooms clean and comfortable,” said Jan Odle, Ironwood’s Hospitality Director. Bob often refers to the crew as “Awesome Bunch of Cleaners.”

On a typical morning in March, seven ABC workers and their job coach were already hard at work turning down rooms. Each member of the crew had a special role to play in the process. Adam and Josh removed the old linens followed by Paul and Ross putting on a fresh set. Carol dusted, Marcel readied bathrooms, and Felicia performed a final inspection, overseen by ABC Job Coach Samantha.

The team swept from room to room leaving behind a fresh start to the day for the Ranch’s guests. At noon the team gathered for lunch together in the lodge—an experience that helps bond the workers and makes employment at Ironwood so special for everyone involved.

“Ironwood is a setting like no other—it is a perfect environment for our workers to show what they are capable of,” said Lynda Kuscienko. Now a Development Specialist with ABC, Lynda previously worked as a job coach supervisor whose work crews included those at Ironwood.

The two organizations look to continue to build on this remarkable partnership in the years to come, with the benefits enjoyed by future generations of visitors and workers.
Ability Building Center (ABC) is partnering with the Minnesota Disabled American Veterans (DAV) to produce commemorative pillowcases for veterans currently in area nursing homes and assisted living facilities.

Available in editions for each branch of the armed forces, the cases are assembled by ABC participants and then screen printed with “Proud Veteran” before distribution.

Rich Daly, Commander of Rochester’s Mayo/SE Chapter 28 of the MN DAV, selected ABC for production after a discussion with Executive Director Bruce Remme.

“ABC is a great organization to work with and partnering with them added a special touch to the entire effort” said Commander Daly.

Four ABC participants have been assigned, overseen by ABC’s Linda Livingston. “Our workers take special pride in doing this job for veterans, as most have parents or grandparents who have served in the military,” Livingston explained.

So far ABC has produced 467 cases. Both organizations hope this is the beginning of a lasting partnership.

ABC Teams with Disabled American Veterans on Pillowcase Project

Congratulations to Our Latest Lowry and WOW Award Winners!

Ricky Bolden
Ricky works two days a week at the Mayo Clinic Dan Abrams Healthy Living Center, one day in-center with the CBE program, one day with the Ability Built Computers program, and one day at Custom Alarm. He is a great worker and team member.

Phung Vo
Phung has a very strong work ethic. He is a quiet, humble man who speaks little English but communicates with warm smiles and actions. He is a great role model for his co-workers and is an essential part of his work team.

Don Berg
Don is a phenomenal worker with a great attitude. He is a great team player and always willing to help his co-workers any way he can. Don has worked hard to succeed in multiple areas and with many goals.

Ruth Grocki
Ruth is rarely absent, always on time, in a good mood and ready for work. She is very friendly and will readily help her co-workers as they gather supplies. Ruth is a joy to work with and makes the days of everyone around her more enjoyable.

Dan Haack
Dan recently celebrated 15 years of service with ABC. He is a conscientious, reliable employee who always ensures his tasks are completed to a high standard. Dan always maintains a positive, helpful attitude on the job.

Phung Vo
Phung has a very strong work ethic. He is a quiet, humble man who speaks little English but communicates with warm smiles and actions. He is a great role model for his co-workers and is an essential part of his work team.

Jim Womack
Jim is a very friendly man who works in-center on sewing jobs, primarily sewing flags and hoods. He is a very dependable worker with a great sense of humor and great work ethic. Congratulations Jim and thank you for your hard work!
ABC IN ACTION

AO Crafts Spread Cheer in the Community

In the spring of 2016, Ability Options (AO) participants began making craft kits for children hospitalized in the pediatric unit at Mayo Clinic Saint Marys Hospital. The craft crew now makes several different kits each month and recently began providing them to the Refugee Resettlement Program of Catholic Charities in Southern MN. This has been a popular activity with participants and an important way for AO to contribute to the community in a tangible way.

The group decides on a project, collects the necessary components and packages them along with a picture of the completed craft idea. These kits are available for children in the Child Life play room or delivered to hospital rooms for kids who aren’t able to leave their beds due to monitoring or treatments. Many of our participants spent significant amounts of time in the hospital as children themselves, and are eager to help children pass the time with a creative diversion like these craft kits.

City of Chatfield Honors ABC Work Crew

ABC was delighted to receive the following note from Joel Young with the City of Chatfield last November:

“Today was the day of our annual Thanksgiving dinner in Chatfield, when the city staff and ABC crew join together to enjoy a great meal and even better companionship. Since it will soon be the ten year anniversary of when the ABC crew starting cleaning here, the City decided to honor them with a Certificate of Appreciation, along with $100 to be spent in any way the crew sees fit. The Certificate was presented by Chatfield City Council Member Mike Urban. Each member of the crew also received an official Pin of the City of Chatfield. The City of Chatfield is very grateful for the members of the ABC Crew!!”

Ability Enterprises “Class Reunion”

Ability Enterprises (AE) began in July 1990 with seven participants. Since then that number has grown to more than 140.

Recently we were fortunate to gather three of these charter members for a “class reunion” photo in honor of the program’s 27th year.

Congratulations to these three for being such important members of the ABC family!

Ability Enterprises pioneers, from left: Tom, Michael and Gail.
TRIBUTES AND MEMORIALS

With great sadness we mark the recent passing of the following members of the ABC family. We honor their legacy with words from some of those at ABC who knew them best.

Shelley Melde

On January 18, 2017 we unexpectedly lost Shelley Melde or, as she was known to many, “Solly Molly.” Shelley was not only our co-worker but more importantly a dear friend. Shelley had just celebrated 15 years of employment with ABC. Seeing how proud Shelley and her husband were at the banquet when she received her award solidified how much her job meant to her and her to us.

Shelley was kind, caring, patient, sensitive and all the participants respected and appreciated her presence. She had a way of making everyone feel comfortable and was always there with a trusting and listening ear. She took great pride in her passion of food, country music, and the Green Bay Packers! No days are ever the same at work, but one thing you could always count on was a good laugh and a heart-to-heart talk with Shelley. Shelley was a “go-to person”—if you didn’t know the answer, it was “let’s go ask Shelley.” We still find ourselves looking for her or expecting to hear her voice. Birthdays, anniversaries and Valentine’s Day will never be the same, as you could count on a dozen pink roses being delivered to Shelley by her loving husband. No one will ever replace our friend! We all miss her so very much!
— Lori Duerwachter, ABC Site Coordinator

Joseph Amous, Jr.

A much-loved fixture at ABC for 16 years, Joseph Amous, Jr. passed away on March 7, 2017 at the age of 61. Joseph was originally from Chicago and attended schools there and in Gary, Indiana.

I had the pleasure of working with this gentle man for all of that time. Towards the end he knew he was dying and was in a lot of pain, but didn’t complain. He remained positive and he came to work up until three days before his death. Joe’s life revolved around ABC. He, like many others we serve, touched our lives and humbled us by the way they lived and appreciated the little things we do for them. He is at peace.
— Mava Perry, ABC Extended Employment Coordinator

Vance Thompson

This past year, Vance Thompson turned 60 years old and celebrated 25 years at ABC. As part of the Ability Options day program, Vance arrived each day to greet his friends with a wave or a handshake. He participated in group activities, worked on craft projects, and liked to play a game we call “wallball” with his friend, Jon. Vance was a big fan of Gumby and the Mountain Dew logo, and enjoyed an Orange crush soda just about every day. He liked to tease with some friends and pat the back of others. When he was happy or excited there was an unmistakable skip in his step. Vance also liked to dance whether it was fists pumping in the air or more of a sway across the floor.

We lost Vance on February 27. His friends at Ability Options will miss him dearly. At the same time we celebrate the life he lived and cherish our fond memories of him.
— Kim Jaworski, Ability Options Program Coordinator
Kate was diagnosed at an early age with ADD, ADHD and mild intellectual disability. Before coming to ABC in 1998 she had problems staying focused on everyday tasks. Being able to hold down a job in the community seemed like a dream too far.

Now, with the help of ABC’s Supported Employment Program at Woodland Industries in Caledonia, Kate proudly works full-time as a barista for the local Kwik Trip.

“I don’t know what I would have done without ABC,” Kate says. “I hate to think—I might have been homeless, or in prison, even. My work and supervisors provide the structure I need to succeed every day.”

Help ABC support remarkable people like Kate

Kate’s story is astonishing testament to what can be achieved through the partnership of ABC’s supported employment programs, a welcoming and supportive employer, and a motivated individual. Hers is one of more than 150 amazing stories in ABC’s Supported Employment programs throughout Southeastern Minnesota.

Unfortunately, ever-shrinking state and local budgets limit the number of participants the program can accept. Increasingly ABC relies on individual contributions to offer these programs to remarkable individuals like Kate.

Just a few dollars a month could make all the difference between hope and despair in an amazing person’s life. Please consider supporting the work of ABC and people like Kate by donating online today at www.abcinc.org.

ABC now accepts recurring donations

For more information and to set up, please contact Amy @ 507-535-7113.