Announcing Celebrating Abilities 2017

Connor Long is an accomplished actor whose past projects include a lead role in the feature film “Weiner Dog.” His work in “Learning to Drive” earned him Best Actor honors at the Festival International Entr’2 Marches in Cannes.

Both Roderick and Connor will be present to introduce the film and answer questions at the after-party.

The day-long celebration at Century High School will include activities for all ages, including food, games, silent auction, film screening and after-party with director and cast. The event seeks to provide a unique and fun way to call attention to the remarkable accomplishments of persons with disabilities in our communities.

ABC hopes Celebrating Abilities will become an annual event and a fixture on the Southeastern Minnesota social calendar for years to come.

Hittin’ the Sand for Woodland

The annual ABC boat, bike and car cruise event to benefit Woodland Industries will be held this year on Sunday, August 12, rain or shine.

The boat portion begins at 10:00 am at Lawrence Lake Marina in Brownsville; car and bike portion begins at 12:00 pm at Elsie’s in Caledonia. Prizes will be awarded at each event stop.

Visit www.abcinc.org/support/woodland.html for more information and to register.

ABC is excited to launch the inaugural “Celebrating Abilities” event in Rochester on September 16, this year featuring a screening of the independent short film “Learning to Drive.”

“Learning to Drive” tells the story of two brothers who embark on a road trip to take their mother’s ashes to the Grand Canyon. Along the way the brother with Down syndrome, played by Connor Long, decides he wants to learn to drive.

The writer and director, Roderick R. Stevens, II, based the film on the experience of his brother Andy, who also has Down syndrome.

The film has been screened at numerous festivals and has won several awards, including Best Original Dramatic Short Film at WorldFest Houston.
Perspectives on the Direct Care Staffing Crisis

Direct care workers have some of the toughest, and most important, jobs imaginable. Yet, in recent years due to social services budget cuts at the state and local level, their pay and benefits have not kept pace with other sectors. As a result, an estimated 8,700 direct care positions are currently unfilled in Minnesota, affecting the level of care provided to more than 73,000 persons with disabilities. We asked two current ABC staff members for their perspectives on the crisis: that of a former direct care worker and of the parent of a special needs child.

Jennifer, Former Direct Care Worker

When I turned 18 I was in need of a job. When a random stranger suggested I work as a personal care assistant (PCA), I gave it a shot. Fifteen years later I'm still in this field in one way or another—it has become a part of who I am.

A person who works in the direct care field is responsible for the lives of the people they are caring for. That’s a pretty big responsibility. This is not ‘just a job’ where you come in, do your work, and leave. I got to know all of the people I cared for and they quickly became more than just clients to me. This happens often in the direct care field—they don’t call it ‘care’ for nothing.

Several years ago, while I was working simultaneously at two different agencies, the government decided funding for these programs would be cut by two percent. These cuts came directly out of my paycheck. I stayed in these positions because I loved my job and the people I was taking care of.

Then another two percent cut was instituted, again deducted from my paycheck. I could no longer afford to stay.

Direct care staff are in charge of human lives, yet the pay is often less than an entry-level fast food position. We’re not asking for much—only pay that more accurately reflects the level of responsibility we have. Failing to address this disparity will only further deepen the staffing crisis our industry now faces.

I am in this field because I love what I do and I couldn’t imagine doing anything else. I certainly don’t do it for the money, but it does help if I can earn enough to pay the bills.

Jennifer Cayetano joined ABC as a VDS Program Coordinator in 2016 after more than ten years working as a personal care assistant. Her experience in the direct care industry is illustrative of the challenges these workers face and underscores the difficulty agencies like ABC face in recruiting for these positions.

Sarah, Parent of a Special Needs Child

I first noticed that my son was struggling with social skills and behaviors compared to his peers when he reached the age of four. As he got older, the need for ongoing supervision and specialized supports became even more apparent. Eventually he was diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder and severe anxiety.

He requires 1:1 supervision to help him navigate social environments appropriately, to use every opportunity possible as a teaching moment and to keep him safe due to his often poor judgment and decision making.

When he qualified for additional services, I was overjoyed, as that meant he would still be able to have the same experiences as other children his age, but with support from direct care staff.

Unfortunately, I soon found out that being approved for services doesn’t necessarily mean the services will be available because of the current staffing shortages.

It is important for my son’s success to be able to build a rapport with his staff. Too often he bonds with a caregiver only to have that person leave months, weeks, or even days later. This can have a devastating effect on his emotional well-being and development.

For me, the staffing crisis is more than an abstract concept. When wages are too low for staff to be able to work in this field, the ability of my son to enjoy a “normal” life hangs in the balance.

Sarah Timmerman has worked for Ability Building Center for 17 years. As ABC’s Program Manager for Vocational Services, she sees first-hand how the direct care staffing crisis affects the lives of people with disabilities. As the parent of a child with autism, she also deals with these issues on a very personal level.

The Best Life Alliance

ABC has joined similar agencies to form the “Best Life Alliance”—an initiative that seeks to raise the level of funding made available from the State of Minnesota for direct care pay and benefits. At the most recent session of the Minnesota legislature, the Alliance lobbied for modest wage increases for direct care workers. Unfortunately these provisions did not survive into the consolidated budget bill sent to the governor by the legislature.

ABC strongly supports this measure and will again encourage legislators at their next session to act swiftly to as a first step to address this growing crisis. More information on the Best Life Alliance is available online at http://www.arm.org/ARRM/Advocacy/Best_Life_Alliance.aspx.

Sarah Timmerman has worked for Ability Building Center for 17 years. As ABC’s Program Manager for Vocational Services, she sees first-hand how the direct care staffing crisis affects the lives of people with disabilities. As the parent of a child with autism, she also deals with these issues on a very personal level.
At its annual meeting on April 25, ABC welcomed incoming Board Member Brad Anderson and honored three outgoing Members of its Board of Directors for their years of distinguished service.

Brad Anderson grew up in southern Michigan and attended college at Michigan Tech University. Shortly after he and his wife Debbie were married, they moved to Rochester for the first time. Through Brad’s career at IBM, they have had the opportunity to live in New York, Connecticut, and London (UK).

Brad is currently Vice President of Transformation and Operations in one of IBM’s business units and he has served multiple terms on the board of a local church. Debbie and Brad have two grown children who live in the Twin Cities. Brad enjoys hiking, skiing, kayaking, and pretty much anything outdoors.

Steve Kann is completing his second term and most recently served as Board Vice President. He and his family have been actively involved with ABC for many years and he plans to continue his engagement with ABC in a different capacity.

Mary Alcott is also completing her term, most recently serving as Board Secretary. She is currently a special education teacher in Rochester with experience in sales and marketing.

Kathie Rogich is stepping down due to family-related issues. Born and raised in Caledonia, she serves as a guardian or conservator for 30 clients throughout Houston and Winona Counties.

Welcome to the Board Brad and thank you Steve, Mary and Kathie for your distinguished service!

Congratulations to Our Latest Lowry and WOW Award Winners!

**Steven Vanadee**

Steven is a hard worker who always gives his all. He enjoys learning new jobs and has significantly increased his productivity over the last six months. Steven is able to switch jobs with little difficulty and is always happy to help where needed. He continues to work even when he isn’t feeling the best. Steven is a key worker in the ABC Forensics Department!

**Amy Rommes**

Amy is an energetic woman who works in-center on a variety of general production jobs and at the Twice is Nice store in Caledonia. She is a very dependable and dedicated worker. Her great sense of humor and big smile brightens the day of everyone around her and makes her a joy to work with. Thank you Amy for all your hard work!

Participant Spotlight: Jeffrey Hussman

Jeffrey Hussman has been working at ABC Works since 1986. Jeffrey does laundry for the Small Change Diaper Service, shreds labels for a local pharmacy, and does shredding and janitorial work at Merchant’s Bank in LaCrescent, MN.

Jeffrey is a hard worker and always pleasant to be around. His co-workers at Merchant’s Bank are always excited to see Jeffrey when he comes to collect their shredding. Jeffrey enjoys eating sweets, listening to music and spending time with family. You can always count on Jeffrey to have a smile on his face and be ready to work each day!
ON THE TEE WITH ABC

On June 5, 114 golfers from throughout the region went “On the Tee with ABC” at the scenic Rochester Golf and Country Club, raising an estimated $62,000 for Ability Building Center’s programs.

PGA Head Golf Pro C.J. Meyer kicked off the scramble-format event with a noon shotgun start under sunny 74 degree skies.

The top flight competition was won by the team of Pat McNeilus, Tracy Peterson, Levi McNeilus and Derek Clarey, with a score of 56 (right, at top). The team of Mike Adkins, Darcy Emler, Erik Furness and Stephen Lehmkuhle took the second flight with a score of 69 after a scorecard playoff (right, at bottom).

Individual honors went to Derek Clarey for Men's Longest Drive and to Lindsay Rippentrop for Women's Longest Drive. Men's and Women's Closest to the Cooler contests were won by Sean Christenson and Karen Erickson, respectively. Closest to the pin honors went to Levi McNeilus. Ron Hanson won the Longest Putt competition.

McNeilus Steel served as the primary event sponsor for the ninth consecutive year. Other major sponsors included Think Mutual Bank, Sterling State Bank, WA Insurance Group, Associated Benefits and Risk Consulting, Olmsted National Bank and KTTC. A total of 32 sponsors provided support for this year's event.

Now in its 16th year, ABC's annual golf events have raised more than $800,000 to support the work of the organization's 13 programs for persons with disabilities and other obstacles to work.

KTTC Anchor Tom Overlie served as emcee of the awards dinner at the Country Club's Winged Foot Ballroom. Nicole Ernster, an ABC participant, shared her inspirational story of returning to work and independence after experiencing a traumatic brain injury (see back page).

Next year's event is tentatively planned for Monday, June 4, 2018, at the Rochester Golf & Country Club.
The amazing people of ABC have made some equally amazing products over the past 60 years. Who knows what's next!

“Big Chief” Souvenir Toy Drums

ABC may be best known for the very first product it made back in 1956: souvenir tom-tom drums. These iconic “genuine Indian drums” were made from coffee cans, tires and feathers and featured vibrant art popular at the time.

The drums were originally created for the souvenir market by a Native American family. After World War II the operation was bought by the LeRoy Shane Novelty Company of Rochester, which contracted assembly to ABC.

Some 50,000 drums were manufactured by ABC workers. Former Chair of the ABC Board, Tom Murray, explained the process in an article in the Post Bulletin, “They’d send the parts over and we’d find somebody to put them together.”

Cribbage Boards

ABC made wall-hanging cribbage boards in the 1960s with various patterns silk-screened on hardwood. The plan was to produce 100,000 boards annually which would, according to a Post Bulletin article at the time, make Rochester the “cribbage board capital of the Upper Midwest, possibly the nation.”

Radiation Signs

For many years ABC operated a full-fledged screen printing shop. At one point it contracted with the US Naval Supply System to produce signs for ships and submarines for use in cases of radiation contamination.

As ABC Operations Director Jeff Amaris recalls, “It was a very exacting job. We produced many variations of these type of signs (one pictured at right). Department of Defense inspectors would conduct very strict inspections on these products.”

Rocket Parts

Plastic sourced from ABC was reportedly used in the Mercury-Atlas 6 space rocket John Glenn used as the first American to orbit the earth in 1962.

…and More!

Some other unusual products ABC has produced throughout the years (those in bold are still in production today):

- Ball Bearings
- Bee Boxes
- Birdhouses
- Boat oars
- Bumper stickers
- Cheese (brie)
- Cutting boards
- Drug testing kits
- Firewood
- Green hand soap
- Livestock bedding
- Magnetic wall chess
- Moccasins
- Pillowcases
- Plaques (decorative)
- Political yard signs
- Retriever training dummies
- Shovels
- Slinky® (prototype)
- Tent covers
- Typewriter covers
- Upholstery sample swatches
- US Air Force decals
- US Navy laundry bags
- Warning flags
- Watering device for chickens
- Wide-load banners
- “Willy the Water Saver”
- Window curtains

ABC is currently planning a museum for its products. If you have examples of any of these or other items produced by ABC please contact Doug Schommer at dougs@abcinc.org.
Nicole’s Story

In 2005, Nicole Ernster was on top of the world. She had recently moved from Rochester to Eugene, Oregon to pursue her passions of writing and photography. Her prospects seemed limitless. Then, in an instant, an accident turned her world upside down.

Doctors placed Nicole in a coma for six weeks in a desperate attempt to save her life. She survived, but suffered a traumatic brain injury. After surgery and a lengthy recovery she returned to Rochester to undergo rehabilitation therapy at Mayo Clinic.

After placement in adult foster care, she was referred to ABC to begin working limited hours on simple projects for Mayo Medical Labs. As she progressed and gained confidence, she transitioned to community-based positions. Today, Nicole is an imaging technician at the Olmsted Government Center, working 40 hours a week to digitize historical county records.

The job has helped Nicole to regain much of the self-sufficiency she lost after the accident. She now lives independently with her two rescue cats (she also volunteers with a local animal shelter) and loves to spend her free time visiting family and friends. Nicole recently shared her remarkable story as keynote speaker at the annual On the Tee with ABC golf event.

According to Nicole, “I don’t know what I would’ve done without ABC. I’ve gotten an incredible amount of help from everyone I’ve worked with there. Thank you!”

Help ABC continue to provide support to remarkable people like Nicole

Nicole’s story is another testament to what can be achieved through the partnership of ABC’s supported employment programs, a welcoming and supportive employer, and a motivated individual. Unfortunately, funding constraints at the state and local levels, along with staffing shortages, limit the number of participants we can accept. ABC increasingly relies on individual contributions to offer these programs.

Please consider supporting the work of ABC and people like Nicole by donating online today at www.abcinc.org.