

ESBLN Eastern Shore Business Leadership Network
Putting Ability to Work www.esbln.org
By Jackie Gast, Director

This summer, thirty four students went to work for seventeen different employers in Wicomico County through summer youth programs coordinated by Salisbury University intern, Andrea Coughlin. The programs were funded by grants awarded to The Wicomico County Board of Education focusing on students with disabilities in Career and Technology Education, to Telamon Corporation focusing on out-of-school youth and to The Salisbury Area Chamber of Commerce.

Since October is National Disability Employment Awareness Month, and since nine of the thirty four students had hidden and not so hidden disabilities, highlighting this program was a must. Summer youth employment programs are not new in our area, however, when Bryan Ashby, Supervisor of Career and Technology Education (CTE), wrote this grant, he was very specific about the population he felt may have a tougher time getting on-the-job training opportunities. The students had to be in a CTE program and had to have a disability. The student's selected had disabilities such as hearing impairments, autism and various learning disabilities.

Shortly before Andrea Coughlin met the students, she was told that one quarter of the group had disabilities therefore qualifying them as having barriers to employment. She admitted that, inwardly, she pre-judged the group as many of us would tend to do. What she found by the end of the program was that the students with disabilities had better attitudes than their counterparts, wanted to learn and were interested in the job, not just the paycheck. Andrea also found she had developed a close bond to those same individuals by summer's end.

Andrea talked about one student who had a low score on a standardized test for math and reading. The student was interested in accounting so Andrea placed him with an employer who needed someone with office skills. Although the student may have been pre-judged to not do very well, he actually excelled with his employer. He was able to prepare spreadsheets as well as other work requiring computer skills in a timely manner. His employer loved him.

Another employer hired two individuals with disabilities who never knew the students had disabilities. The employer is well known in the region, but unfortunately must remain anonymous to avoid violating the confidentiality of the employees. The point is that the disability did not matter. The work from the individuals was very good and the employer had two successful placements.

By the way, out of the thirty four total students hired, ten had difficulty at the job site. Not bad for a population of students who have significant barriers to employment. Of those ten not-so-successful students, only one had a disability. In other words, eight out of the nine students with disabilities in the program were successful, a much higher rate than those without disabilities.

As an employer, be sure to watch for this opportunity to hire next summer through announcements from The Salisbury Area Chamber of Commerce.