



*Elliott Lloyd, Gina Cha, Cheryl Vieraitis*

*photo by Chris Fritchie*

## My Possibilities

By Suzanne L. Feinberg

**PEOPLE WITH SPECIAL NEEDS** thrive in nurturing environments that encourage learning and independence. But what happens when young adults graduate from high school and are too old to take advantage of the programs provided by the public school system?

When Pam Ferrell, Robin LeoGrande and Charmaine Solomon – three mothers of disabled young adults – sat down to discuss post-high school options for their children, they noted the shortage of educational and training programs for that age group in Collin County. When other parents of adults with disabilities confirmed there was a tremendous need for this type of programming, the three mothers decided to create their own.

My Possibilities is a non-profit organization that opened its doors in June 2008 to address the education, socialization and work-readiness needs of young adults with disabilities. The core

program offers five hours of instruction five days a week, although students – known in the program as Hugely Important People or HIPsters – can set their schedules around their part-time jobs. Respite care and after-hours extended care also are offered. Twenty-five HIPsters are enrolled at My Possibilities, the only program of its kind in Collin County.

“Where we are different is that we have a structured program focused on a higher level of self-sufficiency. We hold students and parents accountable, and we work with the entire family,” said Robert Hernandez, executive director of My Possibilities.

The curriculum has four main components designed to increase independence and self-sufficiency: academic, socialization, independent living skills training and pre-vocational training.

The academic component is comprised of math, reading, writing and computer

skills. Independent living skills training includes house management, emergency response, nutrition and meal preparation, as well as physical, emotional and spiritual health. The socialization component encourages HIPsters’ relationships with family, friends and community through field trips, art, and music appreciation.

Although My Possibilities is not designed to help students find a job, pre-vocational training prepares students for that process, focusing on work-related skills like work behavior and time keeping. Special needs students usually receive some kind of job exposure in high school and often are familiar with tasks like sorting, washing, cleaning and sweeping. At My Possibilities, students can continue to practice these skills, which are needed to find a job. One of the future goals at My Possibilities is to work with local businesses and non-profit organizations to give students real-work environments in which to practice these

skills.

Another part of pre-vocational training is helping disabled young adults build the stamina needed to work the typical four-hour shift of an able-bodied person. This will increase their productivity, making them more marketable to potential employers.

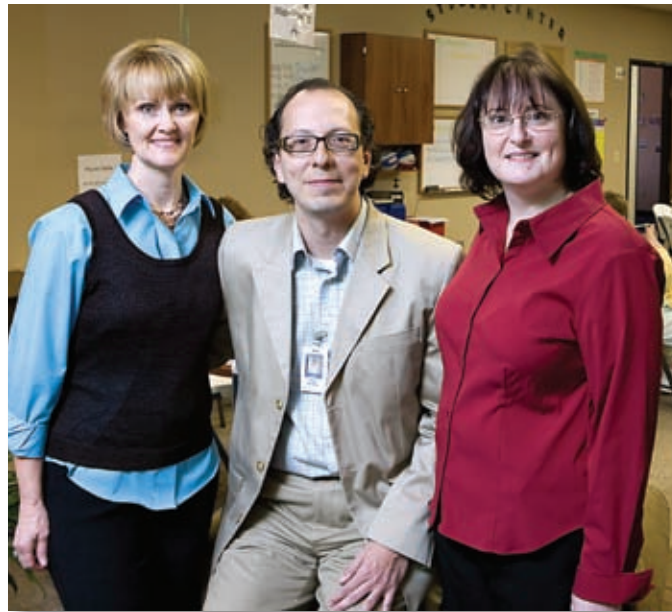
Admission into the program requires a completed application form, followed by a formal interview with the adult and their family. The application is then reviewed by the admissions committee to determine eligibility. My Possibilities accepts adults with disabilities who have graduated from high school, display non-aggressive behaviors and are self-sufficient and independent in eating, grooming and using the toilet. Applicants must be at least 18-years-old.

Trained counselors work with the HIPsters and their families to develop individual goals based on the students' abilities. Parents are involved in the goal-development process from the beginning so they can reinforce the goals at home.

C.J. Enloe, 25, has a mild form of cerebral palsy and is mentally disabled. He attends My Possibilities three days a week when he is not working in the recycling department at a Richardson company. C.J., who lives with his parents, gets ready for work or class each day, packing his lunch and taking care of his dog.

His goals include learning to sort laundry, set the table and properly introduce himself. These life skills will help C.J. gain independence, perhaps help him find a job at a restaurant and may allow him to stay in an assisted living apartment or small house near his siblings one day.

"They are helping me to learn stuff, so I can get a job and work like dad and Stephen (his brother)," said C.J. of the instructors and staff at My Possibilities.



above: Julie Puma, Robert Hernandez, Robin LeoGrande (above); below from front: Joseph Estes, Katy Chapin, Julie Puma, Shara Harrington, Ryan Smith, Hillary (teacher) photos by Chris Fritchie

For C.J.'s mother Patti Enloe, the program has been a "godsend for parents" by taking one burden off of her family's shoulders. She said C.J. enjoys being able to talk about his days at My Possibilities during family dinner conversation, and in his words, that "makes him feel more like a man." He already has expressed interest in having a holiday party for his new friends.

C.J.'s involvement at My Possibilities also means Mrs. Enloe has a support group of her own.

"To feel like there is a community you

can tap in to and that you and your child are not alone means a lot. There are people you can go to who have been down the road before, and you can follow them. It's nice to talk with other parents who are experiencing the same daily issues that you are," said Mrs. Enloe, who first started volunteering at My Possibilities to determine if it was a good fit for her son.

Just like Mrs. Enloe and many others, the founding partners managed careers, families and advocacy work before starting My Possibilities. Mrs. Ferrell joined the Dallas Mayor's Committee for Employment of People with Disabilities, an organization of businesses focused on increasing the employment of people with disabilities and recently served as president of The Arc of Dallas. Mrs. Solomon is a licensed professional counselor and registered play therapist, working with children, adolescents and adults.

Mrs. LeoGrande applied almost 30 years of experience in corporate America to developing the business model for My Possibilities, which enabled the organization to go from conception to grand opening in about a year. She is currently taking a leave of absence from Texas Instruments to devote time to My Possibilities.

In addition to the vision of the founders, support from the community has been integral to getting the program up and running. Community meetings were held to collect ideas about what parents wanted for their children.

"The consensus was a safe, well-staffed program with educated, experienced professionals in a respectful environment. Before My Possibilities the only options were to send disabled young adults to programs in another city or to part-time programs with varying structure or programming," said Mrs. LeoGrande. "Our community wants adults with special needs to be well-rounded academically



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Katy Chapin (left); Teacher, Maureen Maher, Jordan Kaufman, Kathy Stoebner, Dwayne Lopez, in front, Jordan Miller (right)

photos by Chris Fritchie

and culturally, and to be prepared for employment. Our staff has experience working with people with disabilities, and our center has settings to complement skill-building in four areas of focus. All of this sets us apart from other programs, and we're right here in Collin County."

The founders have an amazing vision... This facility is just the beginning of what can be accomplished in the long-term.

There are reasons that programs like My Possibilities are rare. In the past, the high salaries needed to compensate qualified staff and the high costs of real estate kept programs like this from opening, according to Mrs. LeoGrande. That's why one of the organization's primary objectives continues to be creating awareness of the My Possibilities program among parents of disabled high school-aged students.

My Possibilities is an individual pay program. If a client receives Medicaid, a portion of the cost of attending My Possibilities may be subsidized by one of the Medicaid waiver programs. Also,

thanks to the group's aggressive local and national fundraising, some of the costs to attend My Possibilities are covered by donations.

Judy Haven, director of special needs for the Frisco ISD, has been a proponent of the organization from its inception, because the goal upon high school graduation is for students to successfully transition into the adult world as independently as possible, with continued involvement in their community.

"Services mandated by law related to public education will always receive attention, but once students with more significant disabilities transition into adult life, there are often few choices for their continuing learning and contributions to the community," said Mrs. Haven. "My Possibilities has created a high quality, individually-focused option for individuals and their families, as well as an opportunity for students to continue their learning and service in the community."

It is critical for parents to plan in advance for the transition period after high school, something Mrs. LeoGrande started last year. Her 18-year-old son David has Down syndrome and is set to graduate from Plano West Senior High School in 2011.

Mrs. LeoGrande will use the feedback David received in My Possibilities' summer program to gauge his readiness for adulthood. Detailed observations and

reports on David's social skills and abilities will be invaluable in working with the high school. It will also give Mrs. LeoGrande an idea of how the community will embrace David and his level of skills before the post-high school transition. She hopes that after graduation, David will attend My Possibilities part-time while working in a supported employee situation to increase his self-sufficiency.

Julie Puma and her husband David learned about the organization in its infancy and attended the community planning meetings because they were looking for continuing education for their 22-year-old son, Scott. Although Scott, who has Tourettes syndrome and Asperger syndrome, is more high-functioning and will not be attending My Possibilities right now, Julie recognized the importance of having an organization like it in the community.

"Even though I didn't see us being able to take advantage of the program for Scott today, it is needed in general," Mrs. Puma said. "The founders have such an amazing vision of where they want to go. This facility is just the beginning of a long-term vision of what can be accomplished to help people like my son."

Although Scott does not participate in the curriculum, he spends time at My Possibilities as a volunteer, visiting with the HIPsters and helping out.

Mrs. Puma spearheaded the renovation



plans once the My Possibilities facility was acquired, putting her background in interior design and space planning to good use. Hundreds of volunteers and local businesses donated time and materials to renovate the 11,200-square-foot space in just four months. Plumbing, electrical work, flooring, paint and furniture were donated to turn the former bank call center into a functional learning center, complete with a mock apartment to teach practical living skills.

As of the 2000 census, there were more than 14,000 adults between the ages of 20 and 60 with physical or mental disabilities in Collin County alone. Considering the county's overall population has increased by more than 250,000 since that census was taken, it's reasonable to assume the number of special needs residents is probably well over 20,000 today.

My Possibilities is in constant need of volunteers to assist with handyman-type services, in the classroom, on field trips and with fundraising. Upcoming fundraisers include a Bowl-a-thon and a car raffle scheduled for February 14, 2009.

For more information about attending My Possibilities, purchasing raffle tickets or lending your time or services, contact My Possibilities at 469-241-9100.

Suzanne Feinberg is a freelance writer who lives in Frisco.

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