



Project SEARCH focuses on careers Internship program open to students with disabilities

By Kalen Ponche

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Tyler Scott, 18, has worked in the summers cleaning the arcade at Brunswick Zone XL and sweeping floors at the movie theater.

But now that Scott, who has a cognitive disability, has completed four years of high school, he's eager to find a more challenging full-time job.

Scott will be one of nine area students to participate in Project SEARCH, a program designed to transition students with disabilities into the workforce.

Scott will spend the school year at Barnes-Jewish St. Peters Hospital, learning job skills and interning in three areas of the hospital.

It's an opportunity Scott's mom, Lori Scott, never thought he would have.

"I knew he'd be capable to do a real job but the competition now is so hard," she said. "Without someone taking him under his wing, it wouldn't happen."

Project SEARCH was first started at Cincinnati Children's Hospital in 1996. It soon expanded to other employers and now has sites in more than 40 states and five countries.

The Project SEARCH program at Barnes-Jewish St. Peters Hospital is the first of its kind in the state.

"We look forward to being an example for the rest of Missouri," said John Antes, president of the hospital.

The program is a partnership between Life Skills, a St. Louis organization that works to help people with disabilities achieve employment and independence; Vocational Rehabilitation; and the Wentzville, St. Charles, Francis Howell and Orchard Farm school districts. The program will be funded in part by the Developmental Disabilities Resource Board of St. Charles County and Vocational Rehabilitation.

Kay Davis, director of special education for the St. Charles School District, said a group of educators from the Orchard Farm, St. Charles and Francis Howell districts began talking about the need for a transitional program to serve older students about two years ago.

"For kids with more significant disabilities, the rate of them actually going and being employed and having that kind of positive outcome has not been as strong as it's been for other kids," she said. "We thought this would be a great way to improve those outcomes for kids."

Nationally, 21.5 percent of adults with disabilities were employed as of July 2010, compared to more than 70 percent of adults without disabilities, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

The group researched the Project SEARCH program and visited Cincinnati Children's Hospital to learn more. Davis said they saw students in internships sterilizing instruments and maintaining inventories.

"We don't think about students going into those kinds of careers," Davis said. "Those students who went through that program and work at the hospital have fairly long careers there so far."

The nine students who applied and were accepted into the first year of the program at Barnes-Jewish St. Peters Hospital will attend class each day in a classroom on the hospital's campus where they will learn job skills. Each student will have the chance to try three internships throughout the year with the help of mentors.

Regina Wade Johnson, the instructor for the class, said the students will spend the year learning employability skills and job-seeking skills.

"The goal is for them to be competitively employed by the end of the year," she said.