

Positive Vibes And “A Good Buffalo Burger” For Disabilities

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“You become so frustrated by the system you just don’t try anymore.” This statement is spoken eloquently by Garth Larcen, father to two children, including 30-year-old son Max, who has muscular dystrophy. Knowing full well that Max would likely never get a job in the real world, Larcen, a former restaurant owner, started a restaurant called Max’s Positive Vibe Café – and hired his son to work there.

In a new award category this year for Disability Matters — the small business category – Max’s Positive Vibe Café won the small business diversity workplace award. (Other winners included J. Lodge LLC, which recruits people with disabilities for call center jobs, and Parrot Trophies, a trophy manufacturer that employs people with disabilities.)

Located outside Richmond, Va., Larcen and his staff – which includes workers with physical and cognitive disabilities — work six days a week serving lunch and dinner at the cafe. Max greets, seats, takes reservations and supervises the bus boys. He’s happy, which is “due in large part to the fact that he has a place to go to work every day – a sense of purpose,” Larcen says.

Larcen took his initiative one step further when he started the Garth Larsen Muscular Dystrophy (GLMD) Foundation to operate a training restaurant for people with disabilities. The training program lasts four weeks long and they’ve trained or employed more than 200 people with physical and cognitive disabilities. Students “gain the skills and self confidence” they need to find jobs in the local hospitality business, Larcen says. “They’re petrified the first day they show up. By graduation, I’m scared if they stayed another week they’d take over,” Larcen adds.

One graduate, Jesse, who uses a wheelchair, is an expert in Max’s Positive Vibe Café’s adjustable and accessible kitchen. “He can cut salads and make appetizers better than anyone else,” Larcen says. One day Jesse came to work 10 minutes late, which was unusual for him. A co-worker asked why he was tardy and Jesse reluctantly explained: His car had caught on fire on the way to work and Jesse had to pull himself out a window. A bystander removed his adaptive driving equipment and wheelchair out of the car. Jesse hand-wheeled three miles to his job, which Larcen says is a testament to Jesse’s dedication and the level of loyalty that people with disabilities have for their employers. “I have had employees [in the past] that would have called in if they had just driven by a car that was on fire,” Larcen says.

Max’s Positive Vibe Café has received award from the National Restaurant Association and the Virginia State Board of Education as “Employer of the Year.” If you’re in the Richmond area, stop by for a bite. “We serve a great buffalo burger, and we’re making a difference,” Larcen adds.

Dow Chemical’s “Jaipur Foot” Project

The Dow Chemical Company, which won one of Disability Matters’ work-life workplace awards today, says it’s important for their disability initiatives to be global: 60 percent of their workforce is outside the U.S., says Darlene MacKinnon, director, culture and employee engagement for Dow Chemical. Dow just opened a new engineering facility in Shanghai, “its most accessible facility in the world.”

In India, an initiative called Jaipur Foot is using a signature Dow material – polyurethane, which is used in mattresses and other products – to make artificial limbs for impoverished people with disabilities in the slums of India. Employees volunteer their time to distribute the prosthetics on weekends. In Brazil, Dow has an educational program in place to give internships to kids with disabilities in the areas of science and engineering.

Here’s a great reason to work for Dow Chemical: The company recently held a competition for employees to nominate their colleagues as top disability advocates. This year more than 60 employees were nominated; 10 were selected and won an all-expense trip to the 2010 Paralympics in Vancouver. It truly brought the experience home for them,” says MacKinnon.

NOD Helps U.S. Army Hire Disabled Vets

I’ve heard many people speak about diversity in the workplace as it pertains to disability. I’m increasingly impressed by the recent efforts of the National Organization on Disability, an advocacy group that is working to get returning service members with severe disabilities back into the workforce.

At the fourth annual Disability Matters conference in New York City, NOD President Carol Glazer spoke about NOD’s partnership with the U.S. Army on the Army Wounded Warrior (AW2) Career Program. Since 2008, AW2 has placed hundreds of recently returned veterans with disabilities.

NOD has been an “in your face” partner, Glazer says, meaning that the organization “is not waiting for soldiers” to come to them. Instead, NOD is on the ground seeking out these men and women – calling them, visiting them and telling them about work opportunities.

Most recently returned vets – those who served in the Iraq and Afghanistan wars – are now coming home with two “signature” conditions: Traumatic brain injury (TBI) and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). These conditions manifest themselves in similar ways: Memory loss, an inability to concentrate and anxiety attacks, among other symptoms.

Currently, about 30,000 vets have disclosed these disabilities, but Glazer says these numbers are about to skyrocket. According to NOD research, 300,000 soldiers will ultimately come home with PTSD, and another 320,000 will have TBI.

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NOD is working with U.S. Army vets with disabilities in three cities: Colorado Springs, Co., Fayetteville, N.C., and Fort Collins, Texas. She says 65 percent of the vets they are working with are now involved in training education or have jobs.

Interestingly, this group has some other factors that work against them, in addition to their disability. Most service members are under the age of 30, with limited workplace experience (and in some cases, haven't attended college). More than 70 percent are married, and two-thirds have children under the age of 18. "These issues on the whole affect an entire family," Glazer says.

KPMG CEO Opens Fourth Disability Matters Awards

Today is the fourth annual Disability Matter conference in New York City, run by Springboard Consulting. The 2010 Disability Matters conference honors companies for their commitment to people with disabilities in four categories. For diversity/workforce the honorees are Blue Cross Blue Shield, Northrop Grumman and Public Service Enterprise Group. Accepting the marketplace award is Prudential, Toys "R" Us and Verizon Communications. In the area of work/life, honorees include Cisco Systems, PepsiCo and The Dow Chemical Company. And finally, for the small business diversity category, Springboard honors J. Lodge, LLC, Max's Positive Vibe Cafe and Parrott's Trophies.

At the opening of the ceremony we're hearing from John Veihmeyer, KPMG's CEO. The professional services company, along with Adecco Group, is sponsoring the conference. Veihmeyer spoke about a recent audit of 70 KPMG facilities in the U.S., where they found upwards of 600 "mostly minor" deficiencies — and they have already remediated 500 of them. He says the company's strategic priority is becoming an employer of choice for people with disabilities. Furthermore, KPMGs' clients "care about diversity and expect us to reflect on diversity in our employer base."

"Everyone has their own personal style", when it comes to trying to encourage diversity, Veihmeyer says. He likes to create small groups to brainstorm, and provide safe ways for people to communicate and create opportunities.

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