

Internship Turns Students into Professionals

The Vallejo Kaiser Permanente Medical Center was the pilot site for Project SEARCH, which will be introduced in San Francisco in the fall.

By Elizabeth Schainbaum

Vincent Collins, 18, thought working at Kaiser Permanente would be just like high school, boring. But he was wrong. "It's fun," Collins said. "You get to do lots of stuff; you get to do hands-on stuff." Collins said he especially likes assembling basin bowls in the Sterile

Processing Department. He said they have to be perfect.

"As you get to work, you get to learn how to do your job better and better," Collins said. Collins is among 10 interns participating in Project SEARCH at the Vallejo Medical Center.

Project SEARCH is a year-long, high school transition program for people 18 to 22 with cerebral palsy, autism, and other cognitive disabilities. The program's focus is to teach

marketable skills that lead to employment opportunities within KP and the health care industry.



Vincent Collins in the Sterile Processing

Typical Day of Classroom and Work

During a typical day, the students spend an hour going over instructions before going to their assignments. For the next three hours, they work in various departments,

including Infection Control, the Emergency Department, Nutritional Services, Sterile Processing, the Kaiser Foundation Rehabilitation Center (KFRC), and Radiology. Every six weeks, they rotate. Students perform tasks, such as copying and sorting mail, that are often repetitive and require a systematic approach because they do those well.

After lunch, the students head into the classroom for soft-skills training, such as resume writing, interviewing, punctuality, and more. For Wayne Grisby, 18, the internship has given each day a purpose. "I'm doing something as opposed to being home every day," Grisby said.

Project SEARCH Adds Diversity

Project SEARCH began in 1996 at the Cincinnati Children's Hospital. Director of Recruitment Operations with the Program Offices Yvette Crespo brought it to Vallejo in fall 2008. Crespo, who has worked with people with disabilities since she was a teenager, used Vallejo as the pilot site with the intention of bringing the program to various KP Northern and Southern California locations over the next five years. This fall, Project SEARCH will expand to San Francisco; Oakland and Sacramento are next in line. "Project SEARCH reinforces the value of diversity, bringing qualified persons into the workforce who reflect the demographics of the community we serve," said Crespo, noting that the program operates at no cost to KP. KP runs the program in partnership with the Vallejo Unified School District, and the California Department of Rehabilitation, which provides a job coach, teacher, and program coordinators.

Interns are Blossoming

So far, department managers are happy with the interns, adding that certain tasks may not get done without them. Like other managers, Kazz McDonald, BN, RN, Emergency Department manager, said the interns are reliable, hard working, and eager to contribute. With its fast pace and unpredictable nature, the Emergency Department can be challenging for the interns. Nevertheless some excel. In fact, one intern from last year now volunteers there, which wouldn't have been possible without Project SEARCH, McDonald said. Employees in the department enjoy contributing to their learning, and the interns beam with pride from staff's acknowledgements, McDonald said. Vallejo school district teacher Tim Heney, who substitutes in the afternoon class, said the interns are maturing and becoming more confident. "They see themselves at a work site, and before they didn't see that as much," he added. School was frustrating for many of these students, but the internship has been different. "They are learning to do things, see the outcomes, and get good feedback," said Joyce Montgomery, the project administrator who works with Vallejo schools. An intern last year is now working in Food Services and other interns were hired elsewhere. "If we saw one student employed, we would consider it a success," Montgomery added. Collins said he thinks his internship is shaping his future. "I will be a very good worker," he said. "I will be able to find work because of the experience I've had here."

For more information on Project SEARCH, contact Yvette Crespo at 510-987-3037.