Every day, thousands of AHRC New York City employees head to work with one goal in mind - to support and improve the lives of people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Whether it is in a day program, a residence, in-home care, or out in the community, our Direct Support Professionals take on the challenges of their jobs with enthusiasm, perseverance, and an unwavering sense of responsibility.

September 10th through September 17th has been proclaimed National Direct Support Professionals Recognition Week. In this publication, AHRC NYC will highlight the stories of some of our many fine employees. These are men and women who are committed to promoting our key tenet of PRIDE: passion, respect, integrity, diversity, and excellence.

We hope these stories inspire you. If you are interested in becoming a Direct Support Professional or know someone who is interested, please visit AHRC New York City’s Careers page.

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On a perfect late summer morning uptown on Third Avenue, Brandon McElroy was reading the news. He reached the sports section of the Metro New York and became engrossed by an article detailing the turmoil surrounding the Knicks and their star player Carmelo Anthony. Brandon pulled out his notebook, black-and-white and thick and bursting with newspaper clippings, and handed it Peter Doherty.

“I’ve been working with Brandon for several years now; he consistently amazes me,” Peter said. He was skimming through the article, stopping at certain points to write down a question for Brandon to test his reading comprehension. “He types 40 words per minutes, he’s an accomplished swimmer,” Peter continued. “Brandon loves specific interests, especially zoos and aquariums. And he’s a prolific picture taker.”

Peter handed the notebook back to Brandon, who quickly dived back in to the article to answer Peter’s questions. Looking up from the pages, Peter took a moment to reflect.

A History of Service... with a Smile

“If you told me ten years ago that I’d be working with people with developmental disabilities I’d have asked you what are smoking?” he laughed. In 2011, after bartending for “30 some-odd years” at various watering holes around the city (“My signature drink was putting money in the cash register and making sure there were no problems at the bar,” he quipped), Peter began experiencing burnout and needed a change.

“I was fortunate to be able to take time off and started volunteering full time,” he said. Peter worked with conservation groups, the elderly, dementia patients, and eventually people with disabilities. “Equine therapy really struck me,” he said. “It was a six-week program, and some of the kids just blossomed. The second or third week this young child, who was nonverbal and didn’t want any contact, just ran up to me at the bus and gave me a big hug. I have chills down my spine still talking about it.”

As Peter recounted his beginnings, Brandon tapped him on the shoulder. He pointed at the notebook with his pen as if to say “Did I get these answers right?” Peter looked over Brandon’s responses, smiled, and wrote “Very good!! :)

A few minutes later, they moved inside for a jewelry making class Brandon has been attending for over two years. The frequent changes of scenery don’t bother Peter—in fact, it was a contributing factor in his deciding to join AHRC NYC’s Day Habilitation Without Walls full-time as a Community Support Professional.

Preparing to Travel and Participate in the Community

Despite joining the field later in life, Peter aims to contribute any knowledge he can share with often younger colleagues. He starts by encouraging them to model their work fashion after his own—simple button down shirt, loose cargo pants, and hiking boots. “I always tell the new employees to wear waterproof shoes and comfortable clothes. If the subways are running, we are out, so you must be prepared.”

Peter recently made the choice to join an AHRC NYC Supported Employment program. “It wasn’t really a hard decision, but I will miss people like Brandon very much,” he said. Despite moving on to a new position, Peter is committed to his same philosophy of service.

“All of the people we support are individual to the extent that it’s mind-boggling,” Peter said. “We have to forget about what our standards are. Don’t impose your own concept of right or wrong or appropriate and inappropriate. You’ll learn patience. And I never forget to smile and laugh.”
Hindou Kane sat with David Jackson as he went over some paperwork. In a damp and dimly-lit room on the east end of the St. George ferry terminal, Hindou guided David through the document, ensuring that he filled in the appropriate information in each section. As always, David was appreciative of the guidance provided by his Job Coach.

“[Hindou] helps me improve my works skills, and makes sure that I do my job correctly,” David said. “She showed me how to take my gloves off properly and everything. I’ve gotten better since she’s become my job coach.”

The Role of a Job Coach

At AHRC NYC’s Employment and Businesses Services (EBS), Job Coaches like Hindou help workers with disabilities maintain and excel at their work. Based in Staten Island, Hindou mainly coaches Hudson River Services (HRS) workers at the ferry terminal but also has experience working in over 20 different job sites, including retail settings such as Kmart or Target.

“A lot of the workers need reminders or verbal prompts for their work,” Hindou said standing outside a men’s bathroom as Joseph Giunta, an HRS Worker, began to clean it. “For example, I can tell you that Joseph likes to socialize. So I tell him ‘You can say ‘Hi’ to someone but you have to keep moving and working.”

Hindou focuses on the key aspects of being an effective employee: safety, punctuality, and focus.

“Some of the workers will come late without calling ahead, and I tell them that is not acceptable,” she said. “Safety is also very important. Today, I told Joseph that he must use the heavy duty safety glasses when he’s cleaning the restrooms.”

“I Love This Job”

A native of Mauritania, Hindou has a friend from her home country who also works at AHRC NYC. She was inspired to work in this field because she has a niece who has a disability. “The services for her [in Mauritania] are nothing like what it is here. It’s very, very poor.”

Hindou’s transition to the United States has been made easier by the support she has received from her peers and supervisors at EBS-Staten Island. “I really like it here,” she said. “They are hard workers here in Staten Island, and I just like working with them. They recognize your job, and they recognize what you’re doing.”

Working toward the goal of becoming a supervisor herself, Hindou continues to inspire employees like David and Joseph to strive toward being the best versions of their working selves.

“I love this job because I’m helping them have an opportunity out and get a different life,” she said. “You become no different than anybody else with a job. They like to work. And at the ferry, we have a wonderful crew.”
A monkey, a minion, and a fish looked up from the table together, all smiling broadly. Nearby, Thomas Gambaro used a scissor, thin wire, and a toothpick to complete the body frame of a new friend for this odd group of characters. Lina Vezzani-Katano brought out a cardboard box filled with dozens of Thomas’ clay creations and admired the artist’s perfected craft.

“I haven’t told Thomas anything about making the figurines,” Lina, an Art Consultant at Kings Highway Day Center, said. “If I had something to say I would say it, but he’s got it all down.”

Fostering a Lifelong Passion

Thomas’ passion for sculpting pop culture characters began at age 8, encouraged by a close family member.

“My grandma showed me first. She helped me out,” Thomas said. “I wouldn’t say she’s an artist but she collects a lot of glass dolls.” Thomas was also influenced by Wallace and Gromit DVDs and other stop-motion animation—it’s how he got the idea for using wire to support his character’s bodies.

The young artist detailed how his process and materials have changed over the years. He started out by using regular clay, then moving on to Model Magic as a teenager before finally settling on a material called Sculpey.

“I take the characters home and then heat them in an oven—25 minutes, 275 degrees,” Thomas said. When deciding on his next creation, he keeps his options open. “Sometimes people ask me for requests, and sometimes I just think one up.”

“He’s taught me all about this type of work,” Lina said. “I had no idea about all the styles of clay.”

Empowering Artists

While Thomas has mastered the technical aspects of his trade, Lina supports him and many other artists in different ways.

“I’ve suggested ideas on the business side of art for Thomas,” Lina explained. “We’re trying to get him out in the world. Thomas has an Instagram account exclusively for his artwork, and we’re helping to build a blog to further showcase his work.”

To this end, Thomas recently had an exhibition and sale of his figurines in the lobby of AHRC NYC Headquarters. Additionally, Lina tries to meld Thomas’ interests in technology and art by introducing him to websites such as Vimeo, which has a robust collection of stop-motion videos.

“It’s part of my glory when their paintings are sold or other people recognize them,” Lina proudly said. “The art’s being produced here but that doesn’t mean it should stop here. People should appreciate it for who does it or where it was made but for the value of the work itself.”

Lina was born in Japan’s rural Saitama prefecture and moved to the San Francisco Bay Area in her youth. “I just started doing art as a kid,” she said. “I mostly do videos now, but in high school did acrylic, oil, and watercolor [paintings].”

An opportunity to be an assistant to a photographer brought Lina to New York, where she later enrolled at Hunter College as a psychology student. Through simply looking for an internship, Lina got connected to AHRC New York City and started working at Bush Terminal Day Habilitation. She became an art consultant six months later towards the start of 2016.

“One of the cool things about AHRC NYC is that I’ve gotten to know and work with other artists,” Lina said. She regularly engages both artists she supports and her colleagues in collaborations and has a firm belief in the empowerment of creation.

“Art lets people with disabilities make personal choices,” she said. “It lets them see where their own decisions lead them to.”
The Power of the Vote: Nixon Darbouze

Community Support Professional, Nixon Darbouze believes in the power of the vote. In helping to coordinate self-advocacy meetings and activities at AHRC New York City’s Stephen B. Siegel Day Center, Nixon encourages frequent and informed participation in the political process. With Nixon’s support, the self-advocates have also organized a bowling tournament for Brooklyn self-advocacy groups, participated in many Self-Advocacy Association of New York State events, and participated in rallies during the #bFair2DirectCare campaign last year.

“The idea is to teach [the self-advocates] about their rights,” Nixon said during a discussion with Matthew Estep, AHRC NYC’s Self-Advocacy Advisor, who recently paid his first visit to the program’s self-advocacy meeting. “A lot of the time they say what they want and it’s something that they have a right to do, but they may not have access to it or don’t know how to get access to it.”

New Opportunities

One of the group’s current projects is to increase their level of community access by working to obtain IDNYC cards. “Most of the people we support do not have a state ID,” Nixon said. “We have been in communication with the nearby library and seeing if they can come over here and help us.”

Members of the group also spoke proudly about the bowling tournament they organized last year. “It was a big accomplishment for us. It was the first tournament organized for all of the Brooklyn self-advocacy groups,” said Nixon.

James Downey explained that the Siegel self-advocacy group even made their own t-shirts for the tournament. “I bowled a 100-something,” he smiled.

“The main thing is that we had fun and we got to meet other representatives from other programs,” said Lisa Jost, the group’s spokesperson.

Learning about Elections

Perhaps the most significant step forward the Siegel Self-Advocates have taken was an election for group president that took place last year, coinciding with the 2016 U.S. presidential election. “It was an important way to introduce the concept of elections and giving a chance to demonstrate how they work,” said Nixon. The two election candidates, Lisa Jost and Laurence Exantus, both made posters, campaigned for themselves, and even held debates. Although Laurence ended up winning the election, Lisa’s interest in politics continues. She now works as a poll clerk for the Board of Elections on voting days, most recently for the mayoral primaries on September 12th.

The elections were such a success last year that the group plans another round in 2017; two debates and the voting day have already been scheduled. Nixon plans to continue working with the self-advocates to support them as they find ways to achieve their goals. Matthew Estep has encouraged Nixon to share the Siegel Center’s election model with other self-advocacy groups across AHRC NYC.

“The election was a learning experience for everyone,” Nixon said. “We respected that other people chose who would be the president and are still friends and working together. That’s something we don’t see enough of in real political life.”

Self-Advocacy

Today, more than ever before, people with disabilities are speaking for themselves and making choices to effect the direction of their own lives, and are empowered to get involved in their communities to act as agents of social change. An ever-increasing number of people who receive supports through our organization are active in the Self-Advocacy Organization. AHRC NYC supports the Self-Advocacy Organization of New York State and offers advocacy courses in all the boroughs.

Click here for more information about Self-Advocacy at AHRC New York City.
Teaching Real-Life Skills
Melanie Freeman

Whether it’s on the Museum Mile or at a camp in the Berkshires or at an improv club in Koreatown, Melanie Freeman is there for the people she supports. Now a Community Support Professional (CSP) with AHRC New York City’s Day Habilitation Without Walls (DHWOW), Melanie has found success with a wide variety of people and activities.

“I wasn’t entirely sure what DHWOW would be,” Melanie said in the café of the Museum of the City of New York, where Kyle Mendez, a person she supports, mans the information desk on Tuesdays and Fridays. “It’s a lot more flexible (compared to facility-based day hab), there’s room for creativity, and there’s a lot more teaching moments when you’re outside. You have to deal with everyday situations all the time.”

Sharing Passions and Life Experiences

Melanie’s lifelong interest in the theater afforded her opportunities to work with disadvantaged populations. “I wanted to use theater as a tool to help people. I was doing projects with people in prisons, people with special needs, and the elderly with dementia.”

This led to a natural progression at AHRC NYC, where Melanie helped organize an eight-week summer session teaching improvisational, writing, and acting skills to DHWOW members. The classes are held at the Magnet Theater Training Center, a renowned improv troupe. On September 27th, the group convened for their first fall meeting.

“We teach real-life skills such as improving social relations through improvisation,” Melanie said. Through activities such as word association, story creation, and role-playing, Kyle and cohorts Olivia Amos, Misa Moon, and Aaron Stanley learn communication and listening skills in a collaborative and supportive environment.

Melanie started her AHRC NYC career at Camp Anne after hearing about the agency from a friend while traveling through the South Pacific. She got the camp job through a phone interview and then became a Client Service Coordinator (CSC) at Bush Terminal before starting her current position.

“I sort of fell into it but also had experience with people with disabilities,” Melanie explained. “My mother was a special needs teacher and used to take me into work when I was on holiday.”

Melanie said that working in DHWOW has been exactly what she hoped it would become.

“I get to be hands-on and actually teach, which is what I love to do.”

Day at the Museum

Back behind the information desk, Kyle pointed some tourists in the direction towards their chosen exhibit as Melanie looked on.

“Kyle’s been great the whole time we’ve been working together,” Melanie said. “He has really progressed—he used to be very dependent. He’d say ‘Can you do this for me, can you help me with that?’ Now he’ll just do it, email people himself, call people himself.”

Melanie said that she has been going back to school to get a post-graduate degree in psychology, with a goal of continuing and expanding her work with creative arts therapies. Whatever she chooses to do, she’ll have at least one big supporter.

“Melanie’s the best,” Kyle said. “Every Friday, me and Mel go to the pizza parlor to meet with my friends. Fridays are the best. She’s the best staff ever.”