

October 18, 2009

## Enabled to explore

By APRIL ABEL  
*The News Journal*



The News Journal/ROBERT CRAIG

Delaware Book Exchange manager Bill Dill and UD mentor Rachel McCulley work with Vamshi Patachala (right) as they inventory books on Wednesday.

Vamshi Patachala tried a new job this week.

After the 19-year-old Newark High senior donned a bright blue Delaware T-shirt -- his uniform for the day -- he and his mentor, University of Delaware junior Rachel McCulley, set to work at the Book Exchange on Main Street in Newark.

Their job-shadow experience was part of the University of Delaware's Center for Disability Studies' Disability Mentoring Day.

McCulley listened along with Patachala as they got their work instructions, gently affirming Patachala as he carefully placed inventory labels on the bookstore shelves in preparation for inventory.

Book Exchange manager Bill Dill was happy for the help.

"During my college years, I worked in what was then called a sheltered workshop," Dill said. "It was a positive experience for me, and I think this will be as well."

The job coaching program is part of UD's Swank Employment Initiative, which helps 18- to 21-year-olds with developmental disabilities such as autism, cerebral palsy and cognitive learning disabilities gain real-world job experience and determine their own career paths. It also provides job placement services. Funding is provided by a three-year, \$1 million grant from the Howard W. Swank, Alma K. Swank, and Richard Kemper Swank Foundation.

"This is such an important day," said Wendy Claiser, program coordinator. "We are so happy to see the support from local businesses, especially in this economy. Everyone needs an opportunity."

Twenty-three participants and their mentors went out into job experiences Wednesday. They worked in pet grooming, auto detailing, and retail settings. Claiser hopes to double the participants next year.



UD grad student Mike Lewis watches as Aaron Roberts takes a turn at detailing a BMW at NuCar Motors, one of the businesses participating in Disability Mentoring Day.

Michele Sands of CDS said Disability Mentoring Day was among the many ways that CDS and the Swank Employment Initiative can assist young adults as they "age out" of the somewhat more secure environment in which many with disabilities grow up.

"We don't want to just put someone in a job that we think is good for them. We want to help them identify jobs that suit them, based on their skills and interests. It's a person-centered approach," Sands said.

At his job-shadow site, NuCar Motors, Aaron Roberts, 20, toured the facility and tried out some detailing under the watchful eye of his mentor for the day, Mike Lewis, and NuCar senior detailer Isaiah Hill.

Hill showed Roberts how to operate a power buffer on a BMW that was being readied for sale.

Roberts was hesitant at first, but Lewis tried it, and then offered the tool to Roberts.

He beamed as he saw the shine emerge from under the buffer as Lewis looked on.

"This is a great program; it is so great to see the university is involved in this," NuCar Service Manager Brett Orr said.

Roberts, who plans to get his driver's license when he turns 21, enjoyed working with the cars.

"I want to get an Escalade someday," he said.

Organizers hope the program also helps build relationships among local businesses, students and their mentors, and educates the public as well.

"The hope is that prospective employers will be more aware of individuals' abilities, not the disability," Claiser said.

Hands-on career exploration, one-on-one mentoring, and support from local businesses give students like Patachala and Roberts the chance to make that first important impression that might just lead to their dream job someday, officials said.

Sharon Lilley, an employment specialist for the Swank Employment Initiative, said the typical length of job coaching and support after a person finds a job through the program is 90 days.

"Team members are right in there alongside the employees, working with them," Sands said.

For further information about the the Center for Disabilities Studies, the Community-Based Education Alliance or the Swank Employment Initiative, contact Program Coordinator Wendy Claiser at [wclaiser@udel.edu](mailto:wclaiser@udel.edu) or 831-8103.