

Program helps disabled to find groove

Students in UD project able to learn life skills, have fun, meet new people

BY BETH MILLER
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Right around dinnertime, when lots of other people are winding down for the day, dozens of people with disabilities of one kind or another are converging on Alexis I. du Pont High School in Greenville.

They want a new challenge, a new perspective, new information that might help life work a little better, some new friends.

They are students in the University of Delaware's REAL Project, a pilot program run by its Center for Disabilities Studies that offers six weekly classes three times a year to anyone at least 18 years old who has a disability.

The acronym stands for Recreation Enhancement and Learning, and the program offers classes in five topics -- fine arts, leadership and advocacy, independent living, exploring employment, and health and safety.

Michael Pasquale, 18, of Wilmington attended his first class last week and loved it. Pasquale chose the fine arts class, where instructor Karen Townsend planned an evening of Israeli dancing.

Pasquale said he already knows Greek dancing -- and plans to prove it at this year's Greek Festival. He knows some Irish dancing too, he says.

"I was enjoying the fun -- just to learn something new," Pasquale said. "And I liked the dance moves."

About 10 other students were in that class, some of whom were dancing in their wheelchairs because they cannot walk.


Terri Hancharick stayed with her daughter, 18-year-old Brigitte, lifting her out of her wheelchair to help her get the feel of some of the dance movements.

"There's not a lot for kids who are over 18 or 21," Terri Hancharick said. "She's enjoying this. She's nonverbal, but being with kids who are walking and talking -- they're on a higher level than her and she has friendships here. She smiles and she laughs. When she doesn't like something, she gets a blank stare and her head goes down. Here, she's alert. This is the nicest group of people."

A variety of students

The program draws adults with a wide range of challenges. Some, like Brigitte, cannot speak or walk and need great assistance, some have autism or other cognitive disabilities, others are living on their own and have full-time

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 **Michael Pasquale (left) and Jimmy Richardson learn Israeli dancing at Alexis I. du Pont High School in Greenville as part of a University of Delaware program. The program offers six weekly classes three times a year to anyone at least 18 years old who has a disability.**

 **Brigitte Hancharick, 18, raises her hand to show that she is enjoying the classes.**

THE PROJECT

Who: Any Delaware resident, 18 years old and up, who has a disability.

What: Six weekly classes in one of five subjects -- leadership and advocacy, health and safety, exploring employment, fine arts, and independent living.

Where: Alexis I. du Pont High School, Greenville.

When: Wednesdays, 6:30 to 8:30 p.m., including supper and dessert. This six-week session started last Wednesday. The next starts in May.

Why: To promote learning and recreation for those with disabilities.

How much: Free to participants.

To register: Spots are still available in three classes this term -- health and safety, leadership and advocacy, and exploring employment. To register or get more information, contact director Cory Nourie at 831-1705.

jobs in the community.

They meet on Wednesday evenings for six weeks, starting with supper -- pizza and sandwiches -- and ending with snacks and dessert.

"A lot are coming right from work or from a group home and haven't had a chance to eat," said program director Cory Nourie. "Plus, it adds a social aspect. Adults have a chance to meet new people, hang out, and go to class together as well."

Learning about activism

Capacity for the program is 90 students per six-week term. The five classes each have one instructor and one aide and can accommodate 15 students. Participation is free to students, with most of the money coming this year from the Delaware Foundation Reaching Citizens.

Gabrielle Lukoff, 29, of Wilmington, attended Tracy Mann's learning and advocacy class, where she and others watched a video on the life of Waddie Welcome, of Savannah, Ga., and especially on the advocacy that transformed his life.

Lukoff saw several friends and Bank of America co-workers at the project -- including Matt and Brenda Petke of Pike Creek, who heard about the program from the Arc of Delaware and attended the class on health and safety with instructor Eileen Wellman.

"I'm just trying it to see if I like it," Matt, 33, said before class.

And after class? "It was very good," he said.

Get priorities in order

Julie Baker, 40, and Claire Breunig, 27, are housemates in a Newark group home and heard about the program from two other housemates who had attended last fall.

"They really enjoyed it," said Vanessa Owens, weekend counselor at the house. "It's a great program."

Eric Sovde, 59 of Wilmington, has been to all of the Recreation Enhancement and Learning programs since they started last year.

"I really like them," he said. "They're interesting and you learn a lot."

In the independent living class, instructor Vanessa Addeo talked about how to set and change priorities, allowing time and proper preparation for responsibilities and fun.

Parents and other caregivers often attend, with a special forum set up for them while students are in class.

In 'the adult world'

Toni and Harry Davis escorted their 22-year-old son, Harry Jr., to the school for his first night, but he attended the exploring employment class on his own. There, Deanna Pedicone of the Arc of Delaware showed a video on what it takes to be a good employee, contrasting the lifestyles of an irresponsible worker and a reliable worker.

"He's out into the adult world now," Toni Davis said of her son. "There are

not a lot of recreational things for him and he's looking for a job. We thought it would be good to get out and socialize and have other people to talk to. He sees a lot of kids he's touched base with before."

Nourie said organizers hope to expand the program to make it statewide.

Aaron Brown, 40, of Wilmington, who has cerebral palsy and is legally blind, hopes that will happen. He said he found his class informative and hopes the opportunities will be expanded.

"When you deal with people who are physically challenged, they need something like that all year around," he said.

Contact Beth Miller at 324-2784 or bmiller@delawareonline.com.