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Teaching life's simple skills

Helping people with developmental disabilities has unique rewards

By *HIRAN RATNAYAKE*
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Alyssa Parise Arnold credits her Uncle Timmy with shaping her professional career.

He's the reason she decided to find a job where she could help people with Down syndrome and other special needs.

"I'd sing with him, I'd talk with him and I'd just be with him," said Arnold, who now works as a direct support professional for Easter Seals. "You want the best for your family members, and I use that as my guide when I'm planning things."

Direct support professionals like Arnold are the backbone of care for people who can't care for themselves. They help people with a range of conditions, including autism, cerebral palsy, mental retardation and Down syndrome.

Many, like Arnold, are employed by Easter Seals, the state's largest provider of adult day services for people with developmental disabilities and other special needs.

"We want to do work where it's meaningful, where we'll be helping people every day," said Arnold, a direct support professional for five years who works at the Easter Seals office in Pencader Industrial Park near Glasgow.

It may be meaningful, but it can be challenging too. Direct support professionals often work in isolation, and they don't make much money. The median pay for direct support professionals in Delaware is about \$27,500 a year.

"It's one of those professions that has not gotten very much recognition, and there's not a lot of respect for what these people do," said Michele Sands, spokeswoman for the University of Delaware's Center for Disability Studies. "But they do the work that's difficult."

Arnold is one of about 3,000 people in Delaware who work in the field. She and four others were honored earlier this month at the third annual Conference for Direct Support Professionals.

Arnold said she appreciates the recognition, but she isn't working for a pat on the back.

"Everybody needs to be told that they're doing a good job but that's not why I'm in this," she said. "The satisfaction I get is seeing how you're helping make people's lives better."

Focus is on simple life skills

The state's Division of Developmental Disabilities contracts with organizations such as Easter Seals to offer work skills training for people with disabilities.

Direct support professionals teach those skills and also organize activities such as mall outings, karaoke or exercise. They also teach simple life skills that most people take for granted.

Arnold said she focuses on helping people reach their individual goals.

"Some people might need help going to the restroom," she said. "Others need personal care. Some people may not be physically able to get a fork up to their mouth, and you find ways to help them."

Arnold spends weeks teaching clients how to learn a skill or find an assistive technology that can help. The goal is to help people pick up a new skill within three months, but depending on the severity of their disability, it can take up to a year.

Even more challenging is that whenever she's helping one person, a couple more are usually clamoring for her attention. That's because there are five clients for each worker at Easter Seals. This could be overwhelming to a lot of people, but Arnold views it as a way to "turn the challenge into a learning experience."

"You might have 17 people calling your name at the same time, but that's a perfect opportunity to teach a social skill," she said. "It helps them learn patience and to wait so you can give them full attention."

Good communication skills needed

On a recent day at Easter Seals, Arnold helped Jennifer Shuler, who has multiple disabilities, make fliers on a computer. Shuler picks the shapes and colors, and Arnold types the words for the flier for Shuler to copy on the keyboard.

If Shuler composes an e-mail she wants to send to a friend, she'll tell Arnold the words she wants to say and then she'll copy on the keyboard the words Arnold writes.

"It's pretty much just listening to what she says and helping her with what she wants," Arnold said.

The challenges direct support professionals face extend beyond working with people with disabilities. They also must be able to communicate with other people who have a connection to their clients, said Mark Olson, president of the National Alliance for Direct Support Professionals, which works to advance their training.

"They need to know how to be able to talk respectfully about individuals and keep confidentiality," Olson said. "And they also must know how to communicate with doctors and family members."

Learning to make coffee

Tynell Tingle, who also was honored at the conference earlier this month, is a direct support professional at a group home in Harbison run by the Salvation Army. As lead supervisor at the home, he helps three mentally retarded men, between ages 57 and 63, with everyday tasks such as

showering, cooking and cleaning.

Recently, Tingle was able to teach one of the men how to make coffee on his own.

"The guys I work with know what they want and are able to do things with a little assistance," he said.

Tingle, 25, said the people he works with feel like family.

"It doesn't really feel like a job," he said. "I don't really see myself doing anything else at this point."

Arnold said one of the rewards in her line of work is breaking down stereotypes by showing the general public that people with disabilities can learn new skills.

"People can assume that they can't do anything because they have Down syndrome or because they're in a wheelchair," she said. "But my philosophy is to assume that they can do everything until they prove me wrong."



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Alyssa Parise Arnold, who works for Easter Seals, helps Jennifer Shuler use a computer. "We want to do work where it's meaningful, where we'll be helping people every day," Arnold says.

(Buy photo)

ABOUT DIRECT SUPPORT PROFESSIONALS

Direct support professionals work in several fields, including mental health, developmental disabilities, child welfare and education. They help people reach goals that range from daily life skills to being able to work and live on their own.

About 2 million people work in jobs that fall under the title of direct support professional.

The average wage, according to a 2006 report, for direct support professionals working in the private sector is about \$9 an hour, compared with nearly \$13 an hour for those who work in the public sector. The Direct Support Professionals Fairness and Security Act is a federal bill that would provide money to states to increase wages to direct support professionals who provide services to individuals with disabilities through Medicaid.

Source: National Alliance of Direct Support Professionals

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