

Win-win situation

Career Training course puts Pathway School students in touch with working world and gives employers a special insight to children



John Tomaselli, general manager of Homewood Suites, holds a goal meeting with Pathway School interns, from left, Ron Jones, Michael Wagner, Joe DiEgidio and Randy Bacher in a board room at the hotel.

Pathway School student Jason Petrillo says “the best thing” about his job at Audubon’s Homewood Suites is “it teaches you to stick up for yourself...politely...and try things, at least once. It teaches you about real life...how to be appropriate...and get employment after I graduate.”

Student Joe DiEgidio — generally “the kind of person that enjoys cleaning things” — has “enjoyed...learning to use a vacuum cleaner.” On top of that, he says, there’s just something “unique...and very beautiful” about the Homewood Suites complex at 681 Shannondell Boulevard:

“Several floors of absolute amazement.”

DiEgidio, Petrillo and 13 classmates from the West Norriton school for students with special needs began working at Homewood Suites last December as part of Pathway’s Career Training curriculum. Designated “guest services” staffers, the local youths’ job assignments range from front desk and sales to kitchen and banquet prep, laundry, housekeeping and maintenance.

“It’s very easy to teach and mentor people who want to be taught and mentored.”

John Tomaselli

General Manager of Homewood Suites

According to Pathway Career Coordinator-Job Coach Bonnie Hallman, the school pays each student an hourly stipend of \$2.75 for work weeks that typically run about 20 hours. The program is designed to help the students develop basic job skills, and Hallman, their on-site supervisor, says it’s doing exactly that.

“The people here have been absolutely wonderful to us...from John Tomaselli, the general manager, right on



Gene Walsh/The Times Herald

Barb Ward, left, senior sales manager at Homewood Suites, shows Nicole Ream, a student at the Pathway School, a marketing packet. Interns Joe DiEgidio and Crystal Rhodes are seen in the background.

down through all the departments," continues Hallman, who pioneered similar placements at Boscov's, IKEA and a handful of other stores in Plymouth Meeting Mall.

Some 23 students currently work at Boscov's, 21 at IKEA, 10 at Audubon's Shannondell retirement community, and Hallman figures "another eight are waiting in the wings for an opening." Pathway pays all associated costs and

provides transportation and continuous supervision.

"Homewood Suites is our newest site, but their people have had a relationship with us for years...coming to Pathway for our 'Reading Fridays,' our community lunches and our annual golf outing," she says. "They've gone out of their way for us. And this is amazing...such a terrific opportunity for our kids. It's wonderful, too, because they're giving the kids a chance in just about every department they have."

Homewood Suites General Manager John Tomaselli maintains "it's very easy to teach and mentor people who want to be taught and mentored."

"It's been an amazing experience from our perspective because they really care," Tomaselli says. "They want to be here, and the talents they possess could be useful to just about any organization. The key is matching talents to jobs. That's how you maximize productivity.

"We observe them as they work, and you can tell from their demeanor if they're comfortable or not. We've taken them out of their comfort zones, too...to show them what it's like in the real world, on a real job. I tell them quite frankly there are parts of my job that I don't care for but still have to do."

In the end, Tomaselli insists, "we've learned more from these children than they've learned from us."

"To be honest, they're helping us to be better at our jobs...on top of being helpful to us from a practical standpoint. Our ultimate goal — and Pathway's, too — is helping them fit in with the rest of the crowd, and I think that's happened. Bonnie...she's absolutely the best. Such a terrific blend of teacher and mother and coach. And she has such patience. The kids like her and feel totally comfortable with her, but they also respect her. That



Ray
Werst, far left,
and Matt Clark, far right,
show Pathway School students,
from left, Randy Bacher, Michael Wagner and
Ron Jones how to clean and organize decorative flowers.

Gene Walsh/The Times Herald

See WIN on Page D2



Gene Walsh/The Times Herald

Pathway School students and Homewood Suite employees pose together in the lobby of the Lower Providence hotel.

WIN

From Page D1

chemistry is terrific to watch. I think we're all going to feel sad when their school year ends in June, but we're hoping they come back in September."

Student Randy Bacher also has "an actual job at Giant...near school...bagging and doing carts." But, he says, his Homewood Suites' duties have taught him new skills.

"I've learned stuff about organizing," he explains. "I'm not that organized myself, but I've learned some stuff I didn't know before."

Classmate Ron Jones would "recommend this kind of program for anyone who has disabilities...even for kids in regular public schools."

"It's supposed to help us in the real world, and I think it will," Jones says.

Mary Alice Lombardi, Pathway's career education coordinator, isn't surprised at the collective enthusiasm

generated by the Homewood Suites placements. In fact, she calls the arrangement "a natural from the very beginning."

"From our standpoint, setting this up couldn't have been easier," Lombardi says. "Amy Smith from our Development Office told me that she'd met Kristin Bernstiel and Nicole Ream from Homewood Suites here at one of our 'Reading Fridays' and they'd asked her about having some of the kids intern at Homewood Suites. They set everything up within a month...start to finish."

Hallman says it didn't hurt "that Homewood Suites has been a big Pathway supporter for quite a while and...the proposals we came up with — in terms of what we wanted to accomplish with the kids — matched theirs so perfectly."

"We feel so comfortable here," Hallman adds. "The people are friendly and cooperative and so patient. And they're gradually trusting us with more and more responsibility. Mr. Tomaselli sits down with the kids at least twice a week to talk about

various insights and goals, and he continually challenges them to do their very best. He treats them with such respect, too. It's pretty awesome.

"From our side, I see the kids learning how to problem-solve, work as a team and interact with a very diverse public — including people who come from other countries, speak other languages and have all kinds of educational backgrounds. The nice thing for me is watching them get their wings with this sort of opportunity, getting prepared for the next big thing — a job out in the world...on their own."

Hallman gets no argument from Pathway student Crystal Rhodes:

"Here at Homewood, it's been a good experience for any other job I get...and it's fun."

Hallman says Pathway, based at 162 Egypt Road, West Norriton, is always on the lookout for additional job placement sites for the school's Career Training students and encourages area businesses to call 610-277-0660 for more information.