

Arc Jacksonville provides great hope

It's not hard for The Arc Jacksonville Vice President Susan Hamilton to explain what those with intellectual and developmental disabilities want most.

“They want the same things that everyone else wants,” Hamilton said.

“A good home. A good friend. A good job. A good life.”

Each of those ambitions offers its own unique set of both tests and opportunities for those with intellectual and development disabilities, but Hamilton can attest firsthand to difficulty that many of her clients still face in fulfilling the desire for a good job.

“Jacksonville is a beautiful, wonderful and big city,” Hamilton said.

“But when you start to seek employment and job development for our folks, it tends to be a very small city.”

Hamilton finds employment for the nonprofit's clients.

It's critical to expand those city boundaries by broadening the minds of local employers.

She estimated that across Northeast Florida, the unemployment rate for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities is as high as 70 percent — and that, sadly, pretty much mirrors the rate around the United States.

“Our folks want opportunities,” Hamilton said.

“The key is to create an environment where every company in Jacksonville, from the biggest to the smallest, is open to providing those opportunities.”

Hamilton was among a contingent that recently met with the Times-Union Editorial Board to promote October's designation as National Disability Employment Awareness Month.

And the good thing is there are encouraging signs that sense of awareness — of both the contributions that those with intellectual and development differences can make as employees and the benefits that employers can enjoy by providing such opportunities — is beginning to be enthusiastically embraced in our community.

Signs like:

- The Community Foundation of Northeast Florida, backed by legendary philanthropist Delores Barr Weaver, is adding its significant, influential voice and support to a campaign to increase employment and other opportunities for those with intellectual and development disabilities.

“Her whole ‘M.O.’ is to make sure our community is doing all we can to ensure (those with intellectual and developmental disabilities) can be the best they can be in life,” Susan Datz Edelman, a Community Foundation vice president, said of Weaver.

And to Weaver, Edelman said, part of that process is “to change the conversation” on employing those with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

“They are able and talented people, and we want that reality to become what drives the conversation,” Edelman said.



Alexandria Isabella Perricone (left) and Garrett William Rice share a hug while surrounded by family, friends and faculty after their graduation. (Bruce Lipsky/Florida Times-Union).



Arc Jacksonville Village is built to look like a neighborhood. It looks so good thanks to strong local philanthropists. (Bruce Lipsky/Florida Times-Union).

- The growing number of success stories like Megan Bell, a young woman with Down’s Syndrome, who has become a popular and successful employee at the JAX Chamber — and also enjoys an independent life with her own apartment in The Arc Jacksonville Village.

“She loves her job, and she loves her life,” Susan Bell, Megan’s mother, told the Editorial Board.

“To see Megan have such a sense of accomplishment, to see her have opportunities that I never thought she would be given,” Bell said, “has been such a wonderful thing.”

In a video to promote the local campaign to increase employment opportunities for Northeast Floridians with intellectual and developmental disabilities, JAX Chamber President Daniel Davis waxed eloquently about all that Megan has brought to the organization as an employee.

But Davis openly admitted to one major regret about Megan’s employment at the chamber.

“I just wish,” Davis said with a smile, “that I had hired her sooner.”

Let’s make that a “regret” that more and more employers around Northeast Florida begin to express — after they open more and more doors of employment for Megan

and others.