

**At the end of the day I feel good, because I know I did a good job.**  
 Robert Joy, who is among some 40 PARC consumers who are employed by such public companies as A&P, Applebee's and ShopRite.

# Self-esteem, pride gained through work

Community benefits as well as people with disabilities

Marcela Rojas  
 The Journal News

SOMERS — On one of his recent shifts at the Goodwill store, Robert Joy carefully hung men's shirts and women's pants in the right places, only turning once to his job coach to determine whether a black garment was a top or a bottom.

The item was a short dress, and Joy — with some coaxing — figured that out on his own and quickly shuffled to the appropriate rack.

The 37-year-old has been working at Goodwill since mid-December, sorting and organizing the secondhand apparel three days a week. He has now gotten to the point where he doesn't need constant supervision, said his PARC job coach, Emilie Shipman, who will now stop by once a week to check on his progress.

"He picked it right up," said Shipman, adding that the goal is to get him to man the cash register.

For Joy, who spent several years pushing shopping carts outdoors, the new part-time job is a welcome addition to a daily routine that also includes working at PARC's Putnam Industries — a light assembly workshop — twice a week.

"I saw other people had jobs and I thought it would be nice to have one," said Joy, who lives in a Lake Carmel-based group home. "It's boring when there is no work."

Joy is developmentally disabled and is among some 40 PARC consumers who are employed by a variety of public companies, including the A&P, Applebee's and ShopRite.

"It gives them self-esteem and pride," said Shipman, a job coach for about 11 PARC consumers. "They are in the community. People don't run away from them anymore."



Job coach Emilie Shipman checks on Robert Joy as he stocks clothing at the Goodwill store in Somers.

Joe Laresc/The Journal News

ple don't run away from them anymore."

The agency has about 100 people who work in different capacities, from mobile work crews to individual placement, said Michael Miller, PARC's director of vocational rehabilitation. Generally, they start at Putnam Industries, a protected environment at PARC Center that involves collation and

packaging for 15 to 25 companies throughout Putnam, Westchester and Rockland counties.

"What we are really looking to do is introduce the person to a work environment," Miller said. "We want to address any problems there so that they won't be an impediment in the continuum of their employment."

Miller, who has been with

PARC for 23 years, said the emphasis years ago was to create the sheltered workshop and enable clients, coming out of institutions, to develop work skills. The objectives now are for clients to achieve integrated employment at the levels they are capable of, he said.

"It helps the individual have a sense of community belonging and to be contributing members

of society," Miller said. "It also helps to educate on what it is to be disabled and to understand the capabilities that people with developmental disabilities have."

Joy, who takes two buses to get to Goodwill, pondered what it meant to work out in the community as he ate a peanut butter sandwich he prepared on his 15-minute lunch break. He listed

meeting new people and making money to take care of his cat, Finnegan, as important reasons for holding employment.

"At the end of the day I feel good, because I know I did a good job," he said.

Reach Marcela Rojas at mrojas@thejournalnews.com or 845-228-2271.

## Taboos falling for the disabled

DISABLED, from 1A

Though people with disabilities have broken barriers in pursuing education, finding employment and achieving a level of social inclusion, the Launhardts are among a new generation rejecting the notion that the mentally impaired should not marry or have romantic involvement.

"The public's perception has always been that the developmentally disabled are just like little children," said Yorktown-based educator Leslie Walker-Hirsch, a former president of the general division of the American Association on Mental Retardation. "But I think in recent times, we've come to understand that they have dreams and hopes and that they fall in love."

Experts in the field of developmental disabilities agree that the issue of relationships — particularly sexual ones — is difficult. But as more men and women with intellectual impairments assimilate into the fabric of society, advocates say, they come to understand and expect the same personal rights as anyone else.

"I do believe that more people are getting married and there are many more parents," said Sharon Davis, director of professional and family services for The Arc of the United States. "As they become more independent, there are more opportunities to interact."

Though people with mental retardation are entitled to intimate involvement, advocates recognize that they may also need guidance in that arena. Arc chapters nationwide are responding to the call by developing support groups and seminars on dating, marriage and parenting. Agencies offer social activities and date nights. Dating services specific to people with disabilities are offered online.

"Life has lots of challenges whether you are considered normal or not," said Rick Swieret, executive director of Westchester Arc. "The focus of our work is to assist these folks in making good decisions that allow them to experience love and bonding and to also deal with the stresses and strains that come with it."

The Launhardts married after six years of dating, the first of which involved playing a beanbag game at his parents' house, they said.

"Ken finally put his foot down," Judy said about making it official. "We were in love with each other." But their nuptials did not come

### At a glance

- There are an estimated 7.2 million Americans with mental retardation and related developmental disabilities.
- Approximately 200,000 people in New York are thought to have mental retardation.
- There are nearly 9 million parents with disabilities — including intellectual, physical, visual and medical — in the country, or 15 percent of all parents.

Source: The Arc of the United States, the state Office of Mental Retardation and Through the Looking Glass, a national resource center for parents with disabilities.

### On the Web

Online services for people with disabilities seeking friends and relationships: Best Buddies International Inc: www.bestbuddies.org or www.ebuddies.org DateAble Inc: www.dateable.org

without reservations, said Judy's mother, Dagmar Swanson. There was resistance from relatives and officials, but Swanson said she was always in favor of what she considers a "marriage made in heaven."

Swanson raised her daughter to be independent, and it was after attending a seminar on personal relationships at Westchester Arc — when Judy expressed an interest in having a more meaningful relationship with her boyfriend — that she thought the time was right for her to marry.

"I wanted her to have the same good life that I had," said Swanson, 82, of Mahopac. "The attitude is changing. People are recognizing that the developmentally disabled are human and that they have desires."

The Launhardts live in housing provided by Community Living Corporation, a nonprofit agency formed in 1990 that currently operates 31 apartments for 100 mildly to moderately developmentally disabled adults.

Currently, there are four married couples and one engaged couple at CLC. Judy works at My Second Home, a senior-citizens facility in Mount Kisco, and Ken is a



Judy Launhardt warms up dinner for her and her husband, Ken, in their apartment in Mount Kisco. "The secret to a long marriage," Ken Launhardt says, "is to be happy and healthy."

Rory Glaeseman/The Journal News

**Whether or not a person has the capacity to consent, they still have sexuality and a need to express that sexuality.**

Leslie Walker-Hirsch, former president, general division, American Association on Mental Retardation

maintenance worker at Westchester Arc in Armonk.

"Just because they are disabled doesn't mean they can't form a relationship," said Jean Maier, service coordinator for CLC. "They are all gainfully employed and contributing to society. It's really nice."

But saying "I do" is not the only way to be together. Liz Scalice and Kenny Sware have been living together for more than two years, having met through a mutual friend, Marvin Novinsky, in 2000.

The couple, who are affiliated with Putnam's PARC, recently moved to a subsidized apartment in Carmel and like to entertain. On Christmas Eve, they had several friends over for dinner, a homemade feast prepared by Scalice that included a 30-pound turkey, sweet potatoes and homemade pies.

Sware has asked Scalice to marry him on several occasions and presented her with a handpicked golden ring. This is his first relationship, he said.

"People get married. Why can't we?" said Sware, 57, who works for PARC's litter control and at Kobacher's market in Brewster. "I love her. I love her cooking. She's the only one."

But Scalice said her family does not want her to marry and she respects their decision. The two have separate bedrooms.

"I love him so much," said Scalice, 50, who does light assembly work at PARC. "He's a very sweet guy."

For people in Scalice and Sware's circumstances to cohabit or even date, PARC requires that their clients get "informed consent," a state mandate. Individuals must be assessed for their understanding of issues surrounding physical and emotional intimacy, said Susan Mattern, PARC's human growth and development specialist. Informed consent is granted after the man or woman demonstrates that he or she is capable of having an intimate relationship.

"If they don't show the capaci-

ty, then supervision is necessary," said Mattern, who makes that determination with the individual's social-service team. "A lot of people who are high-functioning are caught in between. They are just like other people and deserve the rights and privileges we have. They just need support."

New York has the most conservative laws in the country when it comes to romantic relations and the developmentally disabled, experts say. Four criteria must be met for a person to engage in sexual activity — knowledge, rational judgment, voluntary consent, and understanding the moral and social implications of those actions, Walker-Hirsch said.

"The laws were originally designed to protect the population," she said. "It's a very complicated issue and still an area that makes everybody nervous."

Regardless of where a person might fall on the spectrum of disability, advocates are in agreement that education on puberty, hygiene, safe sex and abuse pre-

vention is still important to his or her development. Training is also provided on the use of birth control for individuals who express an interest or where a need is identified, said Larry Rufo, Westchester Arc's residential department director.

"Whether or not a person has the capacity to consent, they still have sexuality and a need to express that sexuality," Walker-Hirsch said. "They may still want to dance cheek-to-cheek and experience the joy of being with another person."

Though marriage may not be in their future, Sware and Scalice are just as committed as any other loving couple. Sware often takes the bus to greet Scalice when she gets off work, and she always makes sure he eats well.

"They are as close as you can get to a couple without disabilities," said Jeff Linder, PARC's community resident counselor. "They complement each other."

Their friends agree that the couple are the better for sharing their lives together. "It helps them to move forward, to get outside the box and try new things," said Val Fidanque, 35, a PARC consumer involved with the agency's self-advocacy program. "We just want to be treated like anybody else."

Reach Marcela Rojas at mrojas@thejournalnews.com or 845-228-2271.