

Able Network receives donations, opportunity from Apple Suites



By Brock Weir

Over the course of 2013, Aurora's Doug Sooley has inched closer and closer to his ultimate goal ? a pretty sweet TV for what sounds like his equally impressive man cave.

A client of the Able Network, an Aurora-based group whose acronym stands for ?Access to Better Living and Employment? for persons with intellectual challenges, Sooley has found his opportunity for employment at Apple Storage and Suites on Industrial Parkway South. It was a unique opportunity that was carved out specifically for his abilities and it is an environment in which he has flourished.

His value to the company quickly became apparent and Sooley became one of those rare, but very welcome cases where these work opportunities gave way to paid employment.

?Apple Storage really helped us and helped Doug by offering him some paid employment,? says Joan Hurst, Director of Able Network, which runs out of the Rectory of Trinity United Church. ?Doug is a hard worker and a really good person to have in the office. Everybody has an opportunity to really contribute to the health and wellbeing of the community by volunteering and just being out there and present in the community.?

Focusing not only on skills training, but also literacy, transit training and fitness, Able Network relies heavily on donations to keep the program going. As recipients of an Ontario Trillium Foundation grant of \$120,000 over three years, that went a long way to support the program, but funds taper off as the grant period wears on.

Realising the value of the program, Apple Suites recently donated nearly \$7,000 to the network, collected through donations not only by the company but also the clients the company serves.

?This is huge,? says Hurst. ?You can look at the research out there about employing people with an intellectual disability or providing them with work opportunities. It benefits the person, gives them extra income, gives them increased learning opportunities, and it is beneficial for their self-confidence and self-esteem. Everyone benefits from something like that.?

The benefits became clear to Scott Allen, owner of Apple Suites, in ways he didn't quite expect. Carving out a job for Doug with his staff to include washing dishes, watering plants, greeting customers and clients, and eventually adding on processing cheques and mailings, his energy and friendly demeanour soon spread throughout the building.

‘One of the values we didn't realise going into it is the positive impact Doug has on the environment,’ says Allen. ‘Doug is a pretty positive guy and [its effect] was a spinoff we didn't really anticipate at the beginning. We were getting busier and were looking to try and solve a problem, the problem being refund cheques in particular, and the unanticipated benefits were the positive impact of Doug.’

While Doug makes his way through various departments doing his twice weekly errands, it is through working with cheques that he is supervised by Josh Barratt, Apple Suites' corporate controller. He is equally effusive about the impact Sooley has on the workplace, the benefits of now having him on payroll and the value of the placement program as a whole.

The evolution of the placement was also keenly watched by Kirstene Sembrano, who keeps in regular touch with the several Able Network clients who fan out across the community to work placements in Aurora, Newmarket and beyond.

‘I would come here and go through all the job duties he is expected to do and as he was able to complete those tasks independently, it just became more monitoring and visits on my end as his job coach,’ she says. ‘Eventually it led up to this great opportunity for him to get paid because you can do all the work on your own.’

‘You see the value in Doug being proud of bringing home a paycheque and in being able to interact with different people. It is really important getting them out there into being a part of the community. The great thing about Apple Suites is we were able to carve those duties for Doug. Because they job carved those duties for him, he is able to be a part of the workplace. It would be great if community partners out there would be willing to do that.’

As Doug banks his paycheques, he has a specific goal in mind.

‘I'm saving up for a new TV for my man cave in the basement,’ he says. ‘It will be 46 or 50 inches. It's going to be awesome, and we're almost there with that!’