

Enlightened employers

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Mentally retarded prove dependable on the job



photos by RANDY GORST/staff photographer

By Janice Brunson
staff writer

In the three months Jerry has been washing dishes at Mama Locricchio's in Farmington Hills, the "whole atmosphere" in the kitchen has changed.

"The kid's always smiling. He puts life into perspective," said Danny Goff who, with wife Pat, owns the Italian eatery named after Pat's 88-year-old grandmother.

Jerry is employed by the Goffs through a state and county-funded employment program implemented by the Southfield-based Jewish Vocational Service (JVS) and aimed at the mentally impaired. Jerry, 35, was born with Downs Syndrome. His guardian asked that Jerry's last name not be used.

Prior to the present job, Jerry worked for Ruby D's in West Bloomfield. When that restaurant went out of business, Jerry lost his job and had precious few prospects for finding a new position.

THE GOFFS were asked to participate in the JVS program because their restaurant is located near the condominium where Jerry lives independently, enabling him to walk to work.

They jumped at the opportunity. "Flipping dependable help is rough, the roughest part" of owning a restaurant, Danny Goff said, and the mentally handicapped have proven to him they are "very dependable."

Goff's dishwasher the past dozen years at the Mama Locricchio's in Detroit is retarded.

EACH DAY, 10 "handicapped citi-

zens" are deposited at Olga's Kitchen in Birmingham. They constitute one-fourth of the entire work force employed by the restaurant, according to manager Jim Smith.

"We got started four years ago, when we had a great employee need in Birmingham that we couldn't fill ourselves," Smith said. Olga's, a national chain, also employs the mentally handicapped in other locations.

Of the 10 employees in Birmingham, seven are still in training. Their wages are paid by JVS. Three are regular employees at Olga's and another four have been hired by the Big Chill, the Lemon Peel and Marty's Cookies, all of Birmingham.

MMI Inc. in Southfield, a manufacturing firm that produces medical equipment, has employed mentally handicapped and the aged for some 15 years, since owner Martin Mattler observed such a program aimed at providing therapy for the elderly.

"I FELT WE had something they (mentally impaired) could do, mental type tasks that for them are challenging. There's no stress involved. They work at their own speed, whatever they can turn out," Mattler said.

Presently, a half-dozen mentally handicapped work on the company's assembly line with 50 regular employees, producing calculators and other items for use in hospital radiology laboratories.

SUPPORTED EMPLOYMENT is a "continuation of the process to close institutions," according to Michael Reame who oversees the JVS program. When institutions started closing doors in the 1970s, the mentally impaired had few resources or options outside the institutional envi-



Jerry, who is mentally retarded, handles kitchen duties at Mama Locricchio's.

ronment. Supported employment offers meaningful activity, mainstreams the mentally handicapped into society and provides them with earned income.

"It allows them to function in the least restrictive setting where they are best able to maximize their own potential," Reame said.

Presently, some 18 employers in southern Oakland County participate in the JVS program, employing an estimated 50 workers in entry-level service jobs or assembly line positions. They earn up to \$4.50 an hour, depending upon whether they are still in training or have been hired as a regular employee.

UNDER THE MMI contract, for example, supported employees are paid on the basis of production or how many items are completed.

Employers are either solicited because of location, like Mama Locricchio's, or hear about the program by

word of mouth and inquire into it, according to Reame.

Olga's Inquired, Smith said. And public response since has been "very positive," people expressing support for employment of the retarded. Most who bring up the subject know someone who is mentally impaired, Smith added.

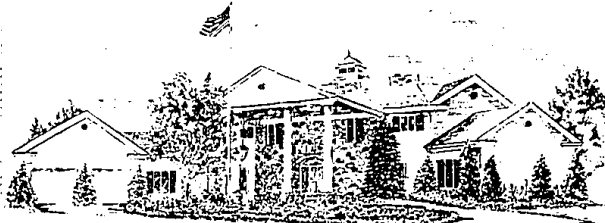
Recently, Olga's in Birmingham was named Employer of the Year by the Oakland County Retarded Citizens Association.

DAY IS DONE at Locricchio's, at least for Jerry on this day. His dishes are washed. He has dried them and put them away.

He signals to the others that his work is done and he is ready to eat. He claps his hands in glee.

"We just love him to death," the Goffs chorus in response. And as sure as the sun will rise tomorrow, Jerry will again be on the job, taking pride in his work.

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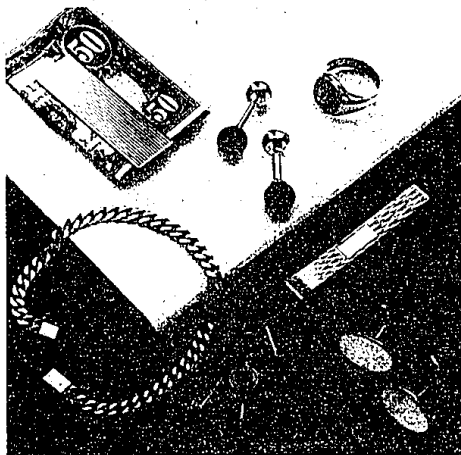
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