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Linking Up

Social network provides fun times for JARC residents.

Zoe Schubot
JN Intern

All young people enjoy hanging out and spending time with their friends. And because forming connections can sometimes be difficult for those with developmental disabilities, JARC is providing opportunities for young adults to meet in a fun environment and to connect with their peers.



Jared Kroopnick of West Bloomfield grabs a bowling ball.

The LinkUp program, which has been going on for about 15 years under a myriad of names, is designed to allow young people with developmental disabilities to interact and thrive in a social environment with their peers.

The events include things like zoo trips, game nights and sporting events that allow young people to experience the community in the same way any young adult would.

The idea is to get these young people “out on their own with other folks their age to meet new people and improve socialization, and just try new cool things that are going on around town,” according to Kendall Bear, children and family services coordinator at JARC.

The events are kept small in order to create an intimate feel among the participants.

“We keep it casual and organic,” Bear said. “Like a young adult would with their friends — you’re not going out to dinner with 40 of your friends and reserving banquet rooms. So it can be anywhere from three people going Downtown to a museum and

having lunch to 10 of us going bowling on a Sunday.”

Summer LinkUp

In the summer, JARC pairs up with JVS to expand the LinkUp program to present Summer LinkUp, a four-week program that allows people with developmental disabilities who are enrolled in postsecondary programs to continue their engagement and education during the summer.

The state of Michigan provides education to people with disabilities until age 26. This means that after they graduate high school, many of these people will continue education through postsecondary programs. The summer LinkUp program is a way for them to continue practicing and refining their social and vocational skills through the summer when they have a break from their usual programs.

The program enables participants to spend three days each week out in the community at paying jobs with the help of JVS. JVS also works with participants on things like interviewing skills, filling out applications and job

preparedness techniques.

Bear says that the employment piece is a huge success among folks in the program.

“They love working, and they love getting a paycheck. It’s very cool to see. They’re excited to go to work, which is great,” Bear said.

While the participants enjoy the employment piece, Bear said the program also includes some more fun components on days when participants don’t go to work.

“They come to JARC Thursday and Friday, and we work on more of the social and recreational piece,” Bear said. “So we do things like going to Greenfield Village and the zoo and water parks, and we work on cooking and budgeting and social skills.”

Rewarding For All

Bear says that by far the best part of being involved in the LinkUp program is the incredible individuals she works with.

“It doesn’t feel like work,” she said. “It’s just a really kind, really accepting group of young folks who like trying new things and are open to meeting new people. And it’s just a really good energy.”

The LinkUp program is highly inclusive and always willing to bring in new members who want to improve their social skills — something that isn’t always easy for people with developmental disabilities.

“It can be challenging for them to meet new people and feel comfortable in those situations. The awesome part of this group is that there’s no judgment,” Bear said. “It’s ‘come as you are,’ and they are just such a cool group of folks who are so welcoming and accepting and fun to be around.” □



Mallory Stoddard of Oak Park and Jeff Stone of West Bloomfield pose for a picture



Ryan Dupuis of Royal Oak points out the score to Marisa Meyerson of Farmington Hills.