

# Career training with Project SEARCH

by MARYELLEN DASTON

Christina Tzeghai, 23, loves her job at Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center. In fact, she is such a dedicated employee in the child life department where she works that she never wants to take a day off.

Not even on the day she had an early morning emergency dental procedure!

When her mother, Seghen Tzeghai, suggested she take the day off to rest and recover after her long night, Christina said, "Mom, I can take a nap after work!"

Christina received the training she needed to qualify for her job through Project SEARCH, a program for young people with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

The Project SEARCH model was created at Cincinnati Children's by Erin Riehle, MSN, RN, when she was director of the emergency department in 1996. She felt the hospital – in addition to caring for its patients – was also obligated to address quality of life issues as well.

She wondered if it would be possible to train people with developmental disabilities to fill some of the high turnover entry-level positions in her department.

Having little knowledge of disability employment, she recruited Susie Rutkowski, then director of special education at a nearby career and technical education center.

Together, they developed an innovative business-led model of high school transition that rapidly became the leading transition program in the United States.

Project SEARCH prides itself on raising expectations and going beyond the stereotypical jobs.

"We've been able to show that people with disabilities can do very complex jobs if they receive the right training," Erin said. "Appropriate preparation is the key to success."

## Finding the right fit

Helping people gain the skills and find competitive employment is the goal for every Project SEARCH participant.



Maxwell Steele graduated from Project SEARCH in 2007 and was hired by Cincinnati Children's shortly afterward. He is employed in the department of food services where he "works behind the scenes."

The program hallmark is total workplace immersion, which means that student interns spend their entire day at a workplace for a full school year.

Because they are embedded in the business, the students gain a level of confidence, maturity and familiarity with workplace culture that cannot be achieved with occasional visits to a workplace or simulated work environments.

A typical day for a Project SEARCH participant starts with an hour of classroom instruction located within the workplace. During this time, students learn general employability and independent living skills, such as personal budgeting, appropriate social interaction, workplace dress and hygiene, email etiquette, resume writing, job interview techniques, etc.

After classroom instruction time, student interns head out to spend the majority of their day in different departments throughout the host business.

## Multi-hallway classroom

Project SEARCH students typically experience a series of three 10-week internships during their time in the program. This allows them to explore career options and learn specific, transferable job skills that give them the qualifications they need to compete for entry-level jobs at the host business or with other employers.



Caitlin Temple graduated from Project SEARCH in 2009 and was initially hired in Food Service. After working hard to improve her computer skills, she secured her dream job in Guest Services in 2013. She now works at the Welcome Desk in the hospital's main thoroughfare where she greets visitors with a warm smile and answers to all of their questions.

At Cincinnati Children's, these skills include data entry; materials management (pulling orders, delivering supplies, managing inventory); patient transport; clerical work (copying, mailing, filing, etc.); and food service.

The year ends with an individualized job search process in which each student intern works with a team of Project SEARCH partners (a special education teacher, a job coach, internship managers, vocational rehabilitation counselor, etc.) to seek employment that matches their interests and newly acquired job skills.

Christina graduated from the Project SEARCH program at Cincinnati Children's in 2013. Her last internship was in Child Life where she impressed her manager so much that she was hired when a job opening came up.

Seghen said the Project SEARCH staff was skilled in preparing Christina and the other students for work. She was equally impressed with how they prepared the parents to let go a little and allow their children to grow up.

When Tina Martin, Christina's teacher, told Seghen that her daughter would get to the hospital to attend Project SEARCH – by herself – via the city bus, Seghen said her first response was, “No way!”

Tina and the job coaches assured Seghen that Christina was ready.

Now Christina knows the bus system better than anyone in her family and even uses it to pursue her interests outside of work.

## Adding value

Susan Milligan is the manager of guest services at Cincinnati Children's. As the mother of a special needs child, she immediately understood the value of Project SEARCH when she joined the hospital five years ago.



Nate Wadell and Raphael Price graduated in 2012 and 2011, respectively. They work together to clean and stock the patient exam rooms in the Division of Developmental and Behavioral Pediatrics.

When approached about hosting internships in her department, she agreed without hesitation.

Guest services already included some Project SEARCH alumni on staff, and she has since hired several more. Some greet visitors and answer questions at the welcome centers, and others work as escorts to help patients and their families find their way through the large and complex medical center.

“Having people with disabilities front facing to the public has a huge impact,” Susan said. “It sends a message to families and to everyone who visits the hospital that people with disabilities add value and have skills that contribute to the organization.”

In no way does she view her hiring decisions as an act of charity.

Susan said that she holds all her staff accountable to the same standards and expects everyone to hear and respond to feedback.

According to Susan, Project SEARCH graduates do well in this atmosphere of high expectations.

They come to the job well prepared because of the training they received, and they have all proven to be enthusiastic and productive workers, she said.

## Learn more

Project SEARCH began as a single program at Cincinnati Children’s in 1996 and has been adopted by organizations throughout the United States and around the world with nearly 350 program sites.

Project SEARCH serves more than 2,500 young people with disabilities each year, and 72.6 percent of the graduates achieve competitive employment. Most Project SEARCH program sites are in hospitals, but the model is increasingly being implemented at host businesses in other industry sectors.

To find out if there is a program site near you, visit their website at [www.projectsearch.us](http://www.projectsearch.us).

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