

Special needs adults are contributing members of the San Ramon Valley

story and photos by Natalie O'Neill

First there was the fight for racial equality. Then came the women's movement. As time progressed, gay rights took center stage.

Now, disability rights advocates say it's their turn—that empowering folks with special needs is next on the civil rights agenda.

And they're not just talking about wheelchair accessibility or equal opportunity employment. They're fueling the movement from the inside, by getting developmentally disabled adults motivated to be contributing members of society.

Getting jobs. Getting out into the community. Getting out of their parents' house. These are key, says Will Sanford, executive director of Futures Explored. His program provides life skills, job training and community programs to special needs young adults in the San Ramon Valley.

The public tends to feel that, "if you can hold down a job, you have more value," Sanford said. More than that, though, it gives these young people a sense of purpose.

"You may not be like your brother or sister who went to a university. But you have a job and it's something to be proud of," Sanford said.

Representatives from Futures Explored met with school board trustees last month as part of a "Planning for Life after High School" panel to help give young adults with special needs resources for transitioning into the real world.

"All of the way through, there was a flavor of independence," said Rachel Hurd, a San Ramon Valley Unified School District trustee, who attended the meeting.

The blanket term "special needs" covers anything from being physically impaired to mentally retarded—and every combination in the middle.

They could be autistic, bright but socially inept. Or have cerebral palsy, be charismatic but wheelchair-bound.

As different as each individual's abilities and personalities are, it's important to focus on their strengths, Sanford said.

Coddle these kids and treat them like victims and they will act accordingly. Hold them to higher standards and they will grow, he said.

Oftentimes there's a tendency on the part of the parents to protect their child and not let go.

"I understand that fear," Sanford said. "These parents have fought so long and hard, and view their son and daughter as someone who's maybe not able to make it in the world."

But here in the San Ramon Valley, a positive life after high school often starts with a contagious can-do attitude on the part of the parents.

With modern medicine and therapy, disabled sons and daughters are more likely to outlive their parents. So the goal is to work at being independent—sooner rather than later.

"There's a range of living opportunities that aren't mom and dad's house," Sanford said.

Matt McClellan can tell you that first hand. The San Ramon Valley High School graduate has limited cognitive, speech and fine motor skills and is on a fifth-grade academic level.

But that hasn't stopped him from landing a job he loves at Target in San Ramon. Or getting his own apartment.

Matt's place

Inside his bright San Ramon condo, the sweet, lanky 22-year-old looks down at the carpet, thinking hard about what it's like to live away from his mom and dad.

He thinks of something and looks up.

"It feels like I can be like other adults," he says.

Matt earns his own money, lives with a special needs friend and drives his own car to work. Part of his job is helping customers out to their car with shopping carts, which he says he likes because he gets to "be outside and wear shorts."

"They give me a lot of compliments," he says of his co-workers.

The second part of the job—which he could take or leave—is to clean the bathrooms. The women's restroom is always a mess. But to make the time go quicker, he listens to Disney tunes on his iPod while he cleans.

"Socially, he's right on target," his mother Marta says. "He's very mellow, very sincere."

After high school, Matt attended Taft College's Transition to Independent Living program. The college, located outside Bakersfield, gives instruction on life skills, provides aides, a transition specialist and security personnel.

Unlike most college options for developmentally disabled youths, it's unique in that it offers dorm life. Most community colleges by state law don't offer a sleep-away campus option.

"He watched his older siblings go off to college," says Marta. "So when

that opportunity came up it was a blessing."

Life skills include cooking and cleaning chores, how to get and keep a job, even self-defense and self-advocacy.

"They showed us a lot about jobs—what you're supposed to do, what you're not supposed to do," Matt said.

He was asked to give the commencement speech to his small class on graduation day. There wasn't a dry eye in the house.

"I think these guys and gals are really going to be self-sufficient," said his father, Michael McClellan.



Matt McClellan, who has limited cognitive, speech and fine motor skills, holds an award he was given at Taft College. His mom Marta watches.

After 18

Last month's "Planning for Life after High School" panel was a hit, Hurd said. The goal was to combine and increase resource options for recent special needs grads transitioning into the real world.

"It really kind of blew people away. People were like, 'Where has this been hiding?'" she said.

Along with Futures Explored, the panel consisted of Regional Center of the East Bay, a SRVUSD Transition Program teacher, a Sheet Metal Workers Bay Area Chapter representative, an Apprentice Coordinator, and a California Services for Technical Assistance and Training trainer and parent.

At Futures Explored, employment services workers evaluate individuals based on unique abilities and skills.

"They all have their own idiosyncrasies. It's a dance," said Jenny McKeon, employment services director.

Lower functioning physically disabled youths work in the Alive program, based out of Concord, which gets them out in the community, sometimes doing volunteer work.

Trainers feel out where the young adults are functionally. That includes where they'll best be able to fit and what they'll most enjoy doing.

"You got to want to do what you're doing, otherwise it's not going to work," said McKeon.

For many of the higher functioning youths, the workplace—as opposed to the classroom—is the best place to learn skills. And when they get jobs, they tend to be dedicated, reliable employees, McKeon said.

"For the most part, once our guys get a job, they are very good at it. They can work in complex and routine jobs," Sanford noted.

When it comes to Matt, he has been as good for his employers as they have been for him.

"It's given him a sense of accomplishment," Marta said. ■