

It means a lot to hold down a job

Muma shares her story with others

BY BRENDA SEXTON
The Courier-Herald

Elizabeth Muma is an enthusiastic, conscientious, hard worker.

When she's not working, she is traveling around the Puget Sound area talking about the work she does and what it means to her, a young developmentally disabled woman, to have a job.

"It means I get out of the house and get to work," Elizabeth said while diligently shredding documents at Greg Vesey Insurance in Enumclaw.

Elizabeth provides office assistance four days a week at a variety of volunteer and paid positions around the Plateau. She saves a percentage of each paycheck, gives another percentage to her church and reloads her Starbucks card with the rest.

As part of her speaking rotation, the Enumclaw resident is used to addressing civic organizations to let employers know there are folks just like her who could use a job. In November, Elizabeth told her story at the King County Board for Developmental Disabilities; a second engagement was the King County Parent Coalition for Developmental Disabilities' annual forum for Washington state legislators from King County.

Margaret-Lee Thompson is a parent advocate and coordinator for the King County Parent Coalition for Developmental Disabilities and is also tied to The Arc of King County, which provides services and support to people with developmental disabilities and their families. The Arc of King County serves approximately 6,000 individuals annually, including people with disabilities, family members, advocates, other professionals, school districts and other organizations.

She said the forum is the biggest gathering of disabled supporters in King County.

"I was a little nervous. I had butterflies in my stomach," Elizabeth said. "I love to speak."

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Elizabeth Muma handles duties for her employers, then heads out to speak to community groups throughout the region.

Muma

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"She's really a go-getter," Thompson said of Elizabeth and her self-confidence. "She's the perfect example for this. She was an outstanding speaker. She takes so much pride in her work."

Elizabeth, she said, is "a real worker, and earning money." It's a case of ordinary people, doing ordinary things and as independent as possible.

Jon Hankins of Trillium Employment Services in Auburn served as Liz' employment consultant, or job coach, for six years. He helped her grow her business through a presentation they would take to civic organizations like Rotary, which has a Partners For Work program.

"Liz articulates what she does and why it's important to her as a young woman with a disability; whether that is to get out of the house or to have her own discretionary money," Hankins said.

Elizabeth said her first speaking engagement was before the Enumclaw Rotary.

"This guy came up to talk to me. It was (attorney) Trip Hart. It was networking," Elizabeth said. "Now I work for Trip Hart and Trip had a friend Greg (Vesey)."

Vesey actually had a couple of friends. Enumclaw dentist Jon Holmberg and a fellow Lions' member spoke to Vesey, too. That was four years ago. Holmberg discovered Elizabeth through her parents who are neighbors.

"Diane Anderson was also at Rotary and heard me talk," Elizabeth said. Through Anderson, Elizabeth landed a job at Green River Community College's Enumclaw campus.

Liz has been working in Enumclaw for seven years, tackling several different jobs over the course of the week, maybe one or two hours a week at each.

"Enumclaw has been really supportive in making sure there are opportunities," Elizabeth's mom Linda Muma said.

"The thing with Liz is she's doing what she loves to do."

"She's a success case," Thompson said.

And in Thompson and other advocate's eyes, that's important for people to see, especially since Elizabeth's success comes after high school. Many schools, including Enumclaw High, provide school-to-work programs for the developmentally disabled. The key is to keep those young people employed or busy after they leave high school, typically at age 21.

"Work is more important than relaxing," Elizabeth said.

Elizabeth is one of about five developmentally disabled adults currently working that Trillium knows about in the area, but there are several other employment agencies that serve this area and some who no longer need the assistance and find employment on their own.

But, according to those in the know, there are hundreds of high school students who graduate each year that do not have any support to help them get a job.

"Liz is one of the lucky ones," Thompson said.

And that's why she was fingered to speak to legislators in November.

Thompson said the developmentally disabled are entitled to certain programs, but "everything else we fight for." Money for programs like job coaches comes from the Legislature.

One of the items the King County Board for Developmental

Disabilities was recommending to legislators this session was employment support like post-school employment outcomes. Funding for the "low-cost, high impact program," Thompson noted, is one both Democrats and Republicans can support.

"This looks to be a good year. Nobody is talking about cutting our services," Thompson said.

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