

RAISE: *Enabling the Disabled*

MAIMONIDES, A 12TH-CENTURY JEWISH SCHOLAR, ranked the levels of “giving back.” The highest level, above which there is no greater, is *giving* that will enable an individual to be self-reliant. Thousands of years later, Maimonides’ influence is alive and well in Central Florida through a unique program that helps adults with special needs overcome the challenges of finding employment.

RAISE (Recognizing Abilities and Inclusion of Special Employees) is a 6- to 12-month work and social skills training program that provides paid, part-time employment at partnering agencies and helps prepare adults with disabilities to transition to permanent jobs.

A program of the Jewish Federation of Greater Orlando (JFGO), RAISE is the vision of Loren London, a dedicated community leader who experienced firsthand the hurdles that exist in the job market as she tried to assist her brother with special needs in his struggle to secure meaningful employment. “Being different was hard for my brother. Although Barry had no friends, when he walked through the door of The Roth Family Jewish Community Center (JCC) of Orlando to exercise in their fitness center, he felt friendship, a sense of belonging, respect and kindness, and that inspired me to create RAISE,” Loren says.

As the program coordinator, Loren manages the program surrounded by a cadre of degreed professionals, 14 volunteer job coaches and seven agency representatives who support seven employees and their seven family liaisons.

According to Loren, RAISE employees work part time and “for most, this has been their first opportunity to earn a paycheck.” Jobs at the JCC, Jewish Academy of Orlando, Jewish Family Services, JCC Preschool and Kinneret (senior housing) are matched to the capabilities and inter-

ests of each individual. And when one employee gets a job in the community, it’s time to celebrate and open up the application process once again.

RAISE employees attend a weekly curriculum-based, group social skills program called Lunch & Learn, created and run by Rachel Slavkin, M.Ed. Rachel is the director of employment and educa-



tion, and the professional force overseeing day-to-day operations, providing job coach supervision, assessment, evaluation of performance and social skills training.

“The Dream Team,” as Loren refers to those with whom she works, also includes Carol Miller, LCSW, director of Social Bridges, and RAISE Program Advisor Ken Schneider, Ed.D, former director of Exceptional Student Education in Orange County.

“Involving community volunteers as job coaches is fundamental to the successful functioning of the program,” Loren says. After an orientation, each job coach works one on one with an employee. “Watching the personal relationships develop as job coaches witness disabilities turn into appreciated abilities has kept our volunteers committed to giving of their time,” she adds.

RAISE works alongside vocational rehabilitation and job placement center Two 6 Resources, Inc. to help educate RAISE families and to prepare, connect

and match employees with prospective community employers.

“One of the most exciting collaborative efforts is the success of the RAISE Awareness of Jobs Campaign,” Loren says.

Do you know of a business that might be willing to hire an adult with special needs?

“Business by business, the RAISE team is opening doors to new jobs right in our own backyard,” Loren says. “Hiring an adult with special needs benefits the employer, the employee, and society, and the RAISE team is willing to meet with any interested business to explain and facilitate the process. Adults with disabilities represent an untapped pool of dependable and capable candidates and foster an office culture of inclusion.”

In fall 2014, RAISE received the honor of being selected in a nationwide competition for Innovative Programming on Disability Inclusion at the Jewish Federation of North America’s General Assembly. “To present the program as a national model was inspiring and validating for all of us who have worked so hard to bring RAISE to fruition,” Loren says.

RAISE has relied entirely upon the generosity of community donations for funding. Every dollar raised has come from families and individuals who understand the need and benefit of this life-changing program.

“RAISE is leading the way, making our community a better place as it celebrates diversity and creates unity — one employee at a time — by offering our adults with special needs independence and the satisfaction and dignity of being a participating member of our community with a paid job,” Loren says. “It doesn’t get better than that.”

For more information or if you are interested in volunteering or making a donation, please call JFGO: 407-645-5933 ext. 236.