Volunteers in the News

Abilities United Focuses On the Positive

Meet Martin Odian, a Menlo Park resident who illuminates the fine line that separates people with special needs from the general population.

By Vanessa Castañeda  Email the author  June 18, 2012

Like everyone else I know, Martin Odian wants a better paying job. But Martin isn’t like everyone else. Or is he? Martin is a 28-year old man who is dealing with a social condition that makes it hard for him to do things that other people take for granted such as cook for himself or get a driver’s license. When we spoke, he opted not to talk the official name of his condition.

"Instead of focusing on what he can’t do, we focus on what people can do," explained Wendy Kuehn, who works at Abilities United in Palo Alto.

The center is a non-profit organization that helps people with unique developmental and physical needs learn the skills they need to be well-adjusted members of society. Last year, Abilities United helped 136 Menlo Park residents find jobs and learn how to express themselves more clearly. The center provides serves for more than 2,500 people and their families in the San Francisco Bay Area every year.

Martin is one of those people. The Menlo Park resident enrolled in the Independent Living Skills Program at Abilities United in 2010. Since then, he has since gained a deeper understanding of himself and how to share his thoughts with others by working with specialists at the center in Palo Alto. He used to work with a similar organization in Pacifica, but he and his parents found the services lacking.

"The organization wasn’t doing much," Odian said. "We were just sitting around talking...so we switched," he said.

That’s not to say that Martin doesn’t like to talk; in fact, he’s quite talkative when inspired by a topic. He’s also the type of person who takes action.

In September of 2011, he co-founded the Abilities United Advocacy Group. The group is a team of passionate individuals at the center who volunteer their time to educate others about the social and political issues that impact the quality of life for people of all abilities. The Group recently launched a campaign that helps people contact their state representatives and tell them how budget cuts were going to impact people with disabilities.

The California Department of Developmental Services projects that the state budget will have about $86,000 less this year than they did last year for
Independent Living Services.

Sheraden Nicholau, community services director at Abilities United, said that while the center is challenged by the state cuts, she is not deterred.

"We use creativity," she said when asked how the center would deal with funding shortages if they were to arise. "We're obligated to do what's right for the people that we work with," Nicholau said.

Most of the funding for services at the center comes from local benefactors and volunteers. More than 500 Bay Area residents financially supported the center last year, with some donating more than $50,000 at a time.

In spite of all these challenges, Odian is happy to work with what he's got. He takes the bus to get around town and go to work. And much like a lot of people I know, he's ready and willing to talk about ways it could improve.

"People need to stop fighting the Transportation Authority, so we can have BART go all around the Bay," Odian said, highlighting some of the transportation issues he faces on a day-to-day basis.

"I'm so sick and tired of fare increases," he added.

Abilities United is located at 525 E. Charleston Road in Palo Alto, California. For more information about the organization, check out their website at abilitiesunited.org.