

Those who work with disabled in San Mateo County honored during ceremony

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Many employers view the disabled as a liability, but Mark Bory enthusiastically takes them on.

Bory, who manages Kohl's department store in Colma, currently has six employees with varying forms of autism and views them as integral parts of his workforce.

"I truly believe that anyone who wants to work should be able to," Bory said. "If bigger companies really looked into hiring the disabled, they would see how much of a joy it is to have them around.

"They really get enjoyment out of coming to work every day," he said.

Bory was honored Friday alongside four other friends of the disabled at the People Who Care Awards, dedicated to honoring people who reach out to those with disabilities in San Mateo County. Sponsored by the Commission on Disabilities, the honorees included teachers, organizations and businesses committed to creating opportunities for those with disabilities.

Janel Astor, who was honored for her preschool developmental work, acknowledges that working with disabled children everyday is far more rewarding than the recognition.

As the director for child development at Abilities United in Palo Alto, Astor has provided many children and parents of disabled children a place to learn together.

"It's a joy to be head-on with many of the people that come in," she said. "Working with families to help them understand their children is the ultimate goal."

Many of the children who have completed either of her two programs are able enroll in kindergarten on time — as many as 96 percent of the students in one program cycle have gone on to enroll in classrooms without disabled assistance.

"In jobs like this, that's the kind of thing that makes everything worthwhile," she said.

The awards ceremony, which took place at the South San Francisco Conference Center, has been held for the past 24 years to honor those who have gone above and beyond the standard for community service.

This year marks the end of the event, however, which has thrown a spotlight on the community's unsung heroes. The ceremony, which relies on donations and grants, will no longer be held due to county budget cuts amid the struggling economy.

San Mateo County Supervisor Jerry Hill, who has been the master of ceremonies for the past 10 years, said it's "sad to see it coming to an end, but I look at it as the beginning of the next phase for the Commission on Disabilities and the Board of Supervisors," which will look to find "another way to spread awareness and recognize those who put their best efforts forward."

His opening speech highlighted the awards' history, as well as the achievements of the commission and the obstacles it faces.

Craig McCulloh, liaison to the commission from the county Health Department, said that even though this may be the last celebration for some time, it's important to remain optimistic.

"We have been able to build a strong community around the disabled in San Mateo, and we will continue to find new venues and create awareness in the community," he said.

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