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People in the News

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## A commitment to finding a good fit

*Program teams with Home Depot to provide jobs for disabled workers.*

By Gloria A. Hoffner

INQUIRER SUBURBAN STAFF

TROOPER—Touring Home Depot executives were checking off hits and misses at the Trooper store when they stopped at the lightbulb counter.

Employee Alan Nanes remembers the pride he felt when Jason Theriaulp, Home Depot global buyer for electrical supplies, said, "This is the best bulb aisle from Maine to Virginia." Nanes, 39, of Wynnewood, is the man behind the bulbs.

"It felt like I had won a gold medal," Nanes said. "I like my work. I like the people I work with. Hearing praise for my section was like a standing ovation."

Nanes is a member of Ken's Kids, a nonprofit organization based in Ardmore that helps young adults with disabilities find employment at Home Depot. Nanes, employed since February 2001, is part of the success of an organization in which members have up to five years of steady employment, said Connie Solomon, founder and executive director.

Such long-term employment is remarkable, Solomon said, considering a 10-year report completed in 1998 that revealed that, nationally, 25 percent of all people with disabilities in a supportive work program lose a job within six months, and 50 percent after three years.

"This program provides real jobs, not charity," Solomon said. "We provide the training, job coaches and follow-up as needed to ensure our young people are doing the job."

Launched in 1998 with one worker at the South Philadelphia store, the program has grown to 70 workers at 32 stores in four states: Pennsylvania, New York, New Jersey and Delaware.

The success of Ken's Kids — when compared with a 2000 study by the National Organization on Disability



RON TARVER / Inquirer Staff Photographer

**Ken's Kids helped Dominica Pierce get a job** cleaning displays and organizing stock in the doors and windows section of the Upper Darby Home Depot, where coworkers praise her work and her attitude.

that found 68 percent of people with disabilities not working — caught the attention of the National Down Syndrome Society, said John Coleman, spokesman.

"Ken's Kids' retention rate is remarkable," Coleman said. "If more U.S. companies made a real effort to hire people with mental and physical disabilities, the unemployment levels in this population would go down."

In December 2002, Ken's Kids received a \$250,000 matching grant from Home Depot. The organization receives no public funding, and through private donations is about halfway toward reaching the required matching award, Solomon said.

David B. Sandor, director of public relations for Home Depot, said the company benefits from the organization.

"We are proud to help Ken's Kids continue its work and regard it as a



RON TARVER / Inquirer Staff Photographer

**When a Home Depot buyer** called the Trooper store's lightbulb aisle "the best from Maine to Virginia," it was like a "standing ovation," Ken's Kids member Alan Nanes — who stocks the aisle — said.

model for other employment and training practitioners," Sandor said.

Last month, the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission

filed a federal lawsuit against Home Depot, alleging the company illegally fired a worker with a developmental disability, said Sunu Chandy, EEOC attorney. The case does not involve a member of Ken's Kids, Solomon and Sandor said.

The idea for Ken's Kids began in 1996 with a conversation between Solomon and Karen LePera; at the time, both were parents of students at St. Katharine Day School in Wynnewood. They were looking at employment options for their children and shared their thoughts with Ken Langone, one of three founders of Home Depot.

With private funding, the families launched Ken's Kids and hired one-on-one job coaches for the potential employees. The coaches work daily with the Ken's Kids employee for about three months on the job and provide follow-up as needed, said Debbie Callaghan, a coach.

"We match the employees' interests and skills with what is needed at the store," Callaghan said. "I work closely with management and coworkers to ensure the employee's success."

In Trooper, Nanes' work is appreciated by his coworker, Ed Driza.

"We are two-thirds of the Three Stooges," Driza said of himself and Nanes. "We get along real well, and we take care of business. Alan is a good man. I wish we had four more like him in this department."

In the Upper Darby Home Depot, Ken's Kids member Dominica Pierce, 24, of Yeadon, has worked in the doors and windows and bathroom depart-



RON TARVER / Inquirer Staff Photographer

**Alan Nanes talks with his Ken's Kids job coach, Debbie Callaghan, at the Trooper Home Depot store. Nanes won praise from a top company buyer for his work stocking the store's lightbulb section.**

ments for three years. Employed three days a week, Pierce cleans displays and organizes stock.

"I like coming to work, and I like my coworkers," Pierce said.

Her coach, Grace Miller, helped Pierce overcome her shyness to deal better with customers. Recently, when a customer asked Pierce where to find mirrors, the young woman replied without hesitation.

Coworkers Don Looney and Tony Lewis praised Pierce's work and good nature.

"Dominica is sweet. She goes out of her way to help," Looney said.

Lewis agreed: "She is a hard worker and a fun person. She's all-around great."

To learn more about Ken's Kids, call 215-482-6980. Donations may be sent to Ken's Kids Inc., The Times Building, Suite 600, Ardmore, Pa. 19003.

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