

Ken's Kids builds on job placement success

A local nonprofit started 12 years ago to provide job opportunities for individuals with developmental disabilities has trained and found jobs at Fortune 100 companies for 181 people since its inception and continues to formalize partnerships with companies and expand into other states.

Ken's Kids provides vocational training and placement services, plus additional permanent mentoring throughout the entirety of the job, for mildly mentally challenged individuals.

"This is a program that started in Philadelphia and now is spread throughout six states," said Steven Wing, CVS Caremark director of work force initiatives. "I know that it will continue to grow with more businesses getting on board and more jobs being filled."

The organization's first and largest partner is The Home Depot, which employs Ken's Kids in 54 locations. CVS Caremark pharmacies last year formalized a pilot program into a full-blown program and now employ Ken's Kids in 13 locations. The two partners collectively employ more than 100 people trained by Ken's Kids.

"This gives these individuals a chance that they may not have had otherwise," said Wing. "It gives them the opportunity to become integrated in society."

Each job candidate that seeks out the services of Ken's Kids is carefully placed in a position that best suits his or her needs and abilities and each also receives extensive support. Almost half of Ken's Kids current placements have been in their jobs for at least five years. The national one-year retention rate in the retail sector is 65 percent, compared with Ken's Kids one-year retention rate of 86 percent.

"The job coaching and one-on-one training that these employees receive from Ken's Kids is amazing," Wing said.

Ken's Kids was conceived by a group of



Barbara Montgomery (left), a Ken's Kids vocational trainer and CVS specialist, works alongside Lindsay B., a Ken's Kids member of the CVS crew.

parents of children with developmental disabilities who were concerned that their children would find it difficult to obtain satisfactory employment. Home Depot co-founder Ken Langone offered to provide the parents opportunities for employment at Home Depot in Philadelphia, and the parents named the pilot program in his honor.

Parents Michael and Connie Solomon and Karen LaPera, who is the co-founder and director of training, directed the development of the program model. Barbara Wray is the program director.

"We all want to wake up every day and feel that we are contributing to something," Wing said. "This gives these adults that opportunity."

In 2008, the charitable arm of Home Depot announced a three-year, \$1 million grant to support expansion of the program. The grant was matched by Lan-

gone, who also plans to donate an additional \$250,000 to the organization through his upcoming retiring charitable package.

Wing said the partnerships that these corporations have with Ken's Kids are not just a community relations opportunity.

"When it comes down to it we are still a business and we are always in need of more employees; it just so happens that our needs are benefiting society in a positive way," Wing said.

The nonprofit's future goals are to develop a board of directors, expand into new markets, create new partnerships, expand current partnerships and increase funding.

"This isn't just for them and it's not just for us," Wing said. "It's a human thing; everyone deserves the opportunity to work."

— Brian Loschiavo