

Able to Profit. . .

Cerebral Palsy Center helps disabled start businesses

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ENTREPRENEURS with disabilities pose for a photo at the Cerebral Palsy Center for the Bay Area, where they develop their own businesses. (RAY CHAVEZ - Staff)

THE LASER WAND strapped onto Vanessa Coveau's right ear points to icons on the computerized slate before her. Each time she moves her head, the laser beam shifts to choose a new symbol. In this way, Coveau, 28, taps out a letter and then a word on her computer screen.

Not far from Coveau's desk, Monique Harris uses a 2-foot-long pointer fastened to the top of her head. As Harris bends toward her keyboard, the instrument allows her to select keys one by one in order to type out words.

Both women have cerebral palsy, a group of neurological disorders that affect body movement and muscle coordination, and both are businesswomen getting their enterprises off the ground through a unique program at an Oakland-based organization that teaches its clients how to start their own businesses.

The Cerebral Palsy Center for the Bay Area Inc. on Lincoln Avenue in Oakland has been around since 1939, begun by parents in their homes. It is licensed to serve 75 adults a day. Coveau and Harris are two of 15 clients getting support there to launch their own enterprises.

"When you own your own company, you can work from your home. I have always wanted to have my own company," said Harris, who, along with others in the group, started a publishing company called Communications at Ease.

Three years ago, thanks to a grant from UPS, the Cerebral Palsy Center launched a program to teach some of its clients the tools of entrepreneurship with the goal that they would achieve

self-employment. The realization was that most employers are not set up to employ the severely disabled, but if the disabled could employ themselves, with their own equipment and attendants in place, so much the better.

"Disabled folks were formerly not thought of as good candidates for employment. Now they're absolutely employable because technology has leveled the playing field," said Bill Pelter, assistant executive director of the Cerebral Palsy Center.

Aram Attarian II, an independent service provider for the state Department of Rehabilitation, coaches Coveau in launching her eBay business. He said he is inspired by the work he sees at the Cerebral Palsy Center.

"Unless you've worked with people with disabilities, the first time you walk into the Cerebral Palsy Center, you can't begin to comprehend how different life is for people with cerebral palsy," said Attarian, who is also disabled. "Many cannot keep their heads straight, their limbs steady, speak clearly or completely control their bodily functions. Yet they are here day after day doing what you and I do. The only difference is their tools.

"But, like you and me, their goals are independence, self-expression and to be treated with dignity."

Surprisingly productive

Carolyn Chrisler, formerly a teacher of computer literacy, is now the lead teacher for business development to this group.

"These guys really pick me up," she said of the focus and enthusiasm of her students, who range from young adults in their 20s to people in their 40s.

"Even though their abilities are limited, they produce more than a lot of people I've had to work with (outside the Cerebral Palsy Center)," Chrisler said.

Chrisler helps the students formulate and execute their business plans, all the while helping to interpret the sometimes tortured speech uttered by twisted faces.

Not only cerebral palsy patients but those suffering from other severe disabilities come daily to Cerebral Palsy Center. They are supported by Social Security benefits.

PASS plans

The participants in the entrepreneurial endeavor, called the Cornerstone Program, are seeking to gain their PASS plans, said Chrisler, referring to the transitional Social Security program, Plan to Achieve Self-Support, which shelters their income from affecting their Social Security benefits while they're becoming self-sufficient.

The enterprises are under way at the Cerebral Palsy Center's rambling workshop, a large hall equipped with the cluster of powerful computers adapted to the participants' various abilities.

The program boasts several success stories, including Communications at Ease. Three years ago, an original team of six formed the company, which designs and produces laminated boards that help the speech challenged interact with their world. With specialized software, Communications at Ease produces placards of varying size that are emblazoned with icons and text to help the disabled communicate in a variety of venues, whether it's with the health care system, in school or with their attendants. The placards are available in English, Spanish and Chinese. So far, Communications at Ease, founded by program participants Harris, Verna Randolph, Kevin Siemens and Luis Campos, has 25 customers and the number is growing. In the last 30 days, the company has worked up \$2,000 worth of orders. Meanwhile, the team is preparing a disaster preparedness kit for the disabled.

Cornerstone Project participant Lindsay Worthington is starting a pet supply retail Web site. The 22-year-old with the brilliant smile has had her setbacks in trying to determine how best to set up her supply chain and distribution.

"People who were supporting her before have backed out, but I have new ideas and we're going to follow through on them," Chrisler said.

Still, Worthington has her place-saving Web site at <http://www.dogoncat.com> (as yet inactive) and her father as her business partner.

Helping speech impaired

Siemens is negotiating with Golden Gate Transit and Western Contra Costa Transit Authority to sell them placards he has designed for the speech impaired to use. These products are similar to those of Communication at Ease, but they are focused on the experience of a disabled person trying to mount a public transit vehicle and communicating with the driver.

Siemens, who is speech impaired, rocks and crows in triumph in reliving the reception he felt he received from the two transit agencies.

Neither agency has yet agreed to use the placards, but Western Contra Costa Transit General Manager Charles Anderson said he expects another visit with Siemens and said he was impressed with the product.

Coveau has been selling purses and collectibles on eBay for four or five years, using the moniker Csharkbay. A graduate of Vista College — now called Berkeley City College — Coveau taught herself how to trade on eBay and mentors others in the Cerebral Palsy Center business group. She has been helping Monique Davis, another Cornerstone Program participant, in her attempt to start an eBay business, too.

Those who sell directly on eBay rely a great deal on what is donated to the Cerebral Palsy Center for their merchandise. They keep the proceeds for themselves. Any type of collectible, from antique cookie jars to designer handbags, has a good run with the Cornerstone merchants.

Artistic talent

There's plenty of artistic talent here as well. Tamar Raine is a painter, adept in oils and watercolors, who is just now starting to sell her work on Foster City-based CafePress.com. Her contributions can be seen at <http://www.CafePress.com/TamarMag>.

Avis Gray, a writer all of her 66 years, has written "Tales of Uncle Burt," a 26-page family memoir. It is currently sold on CafePress.com and will soon be available on Amazon.com. All her other fiction and nonfiction pieces — all written with one finger — have been input into a computer and are waiting for Harris to design covers for them.

"Some of these businesses will become self-sufficient, but some will only be earning quality-of-life money," Pelter said, allowing people to treat themselves to movies and other leisure activities.

"These are the hardest working, most dedicated group of people I've ever seen in my life, and their computer skills are awesome," Chrisler said. "Even Avis (Gray), who types with one finger, produces 10 to 13 pages a day. I have to tell her to take a break."