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Glendale College program matching autistic adults with trade jobs flourishes within first year



Titan Gilroy, a boxer turned machinist, visits Glendale Community College students in 2016. A year after its debut, the college's partnership with the Uniquely Abled Project has been successful in training adults with autism and leading them to jobs as operators and programmers. (File Photo)



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James Molien spent years taking business classes at Glendale Community College but faced difficulty landing a full-time job.

The 27-year-old Glendale resident said he'd take part-time stints to earn cash and help support his mother and grandmother. Pressure increased as he was expected to be the breadwinner for the household.

Molien found relief when a friend told him about a program that launched at the Glendale college a year ago. The Uniquely Abled Academy offers training to highly functioning adults with autism to operate computer-numerical-control machines and work as machinist apprentices and programmers.

The academy is a collaboration between Glendale Community College and the Uniquely Abled Project. It works with educators, nonprofits and corporations to place autistic adults in high-performing, well-paid jobs.

Now, a year after the academy debuted, eight of the 13 students who completed the program have landed full-time jobs as computer-numerical-control operators, while two decided to pursue other career paths, said Ivan Rosenburg, who founded the Valley Village-based project in 2013.

The second cohort graduated this month and will begin seeking jobs.

"When I saw this program, it was a way out of the hole I was in," said Molien, who has Asperger's Syndrome. "Employers are happy you're educated, but don't care unless you have viable skills. The program really helped with that."

Molien works as a lathe technician at Solar Precision Products Inc. in Burbank.

"I'm in a much better position now. I have money for once," he said.

The academy's success in placing autistic adults "validated the original perspective" that these adults can do "extraordinarily well" in the manufacturing world, Rosenburg said.

Rosenburg, a management consultant for aerospace and manufacturing firms, began the project after he wondered what his two autistic teens would do after graduating high school. He also wanted to change the social paradigm from "disabled" to "uniquely abled."

He said he realized there was a high demand for computer-numerical-control operators and used his Rolodex of contacts to see which companies would be interested in collaborating on his project.

Marcel Becker, employment coordinator at the Glendale branch of the Department of Rehabilitation, said it's been "really smooth" transitioning graduates into entry-level positions because "the need was there."

Björn Paulsson hired two graduates from the program for his Van Nuys-based company, Paulsson, Inc., which specializes in oil and gas exploration services and produces fiber-optic equipment for geophysical exploration.

His employees help manage computer-numerical-control machines that manufacture applications to help monitor earthquakes.

"They are eager to learn and very cooperative and quite knowledgeable about the machines," Paulsson said. "It's by and large very good."

He took a chance on recruiting graduates from the program because he has family with special needs. One of the students recently passed a six-month probation period at the company.

Paulsson said he plans to continue recruiting employers from the Uniquely Abled Academy.

"There is a good pool of employees within the autistic community. I've seen what they can do," he said.

Rosenburg said parents have approached him with tears in their eyes after graduation ceremonies, saying their children found "a purpose in life." Plans to open more academies in the near future are in the works, he added.

Applications are being accepted for the next 16-week program, which is slated for Aug. 28 through Dec. 13. Classes will be 8 a.m. to 3:15 p.m. Monday through Thursday.

For more information, visit uniquelyabledproject.org.

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