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Opening Doors And Embracing Opportunity

Students Clamoring For WTC's Newest Training Venture

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Harley is sales and smiles at the freshly-stocked sales counter

In the late fall of 2018, creative minds came together to discuss Maryland's changing economy. Current job outlook reports were pointing to 'salesperson' as the job with the highest total openings in the state and 'retail' as one of the top in-demand occupations. A pathway was needed for people served by DORS (Division of Rehabilitation Services) who lack work experience at a disproportionately higher rate than their peers. As luck would have it, a timely opportunity presented itself at the Workforce & Technology Center (WTC). Staff undertook the remodel of a neglected and under-utilized gift shop, and a new relevant and current work-based learning (WBL) site was born.

In its heyday, the eponymous 'McKenna's Korner' (the aforementioned shop) sold handbags, costume jewelry, shaving cream, and cologne. The revamp brought with it an influx of elbow grease, ideas, and the ability to replenish the shelves with new inventory. (Also traded was the second, incongruous "K" in the title for a proper "C"). Now, students are running the store and earning skills and experience alongside their selected training. McKenna's stays open consistently every day from ten to two o'clock and the dusty greeting cards and bric-a-brac have been replaced with snacks, drinks, ice cream, gift items for graduation and for holidays, WTC-branded logo shirts and water bottles, hygiene items, and the most requested electronic items like chargers and cords. McKenna's has morphed into WTC's school store for the 21st century.

The impact on the WTC community has been transformational. Students work on soft skills while interacting with diverse customers in a safe space. WTC instructors are able to use their preferred approach to learning: practical, hands-on, real world experience. McKenna's mobile 'Corner Cart' travels to meetings and other events where students and employees get time to be social with one another and where students can use the cash register. When called upon to announce refreshments for sale, students can dip their toes into public speaking. Students engage to the level that they are able and the store has the ability to provide a scaffolded and appropriate learning experience. Perhaps most importantly, there has been a significant boost in morale as hungry office workers and students alike have more options for mid-morning boosts and afternoon slumps.

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Exceeding Expectations Through Retail

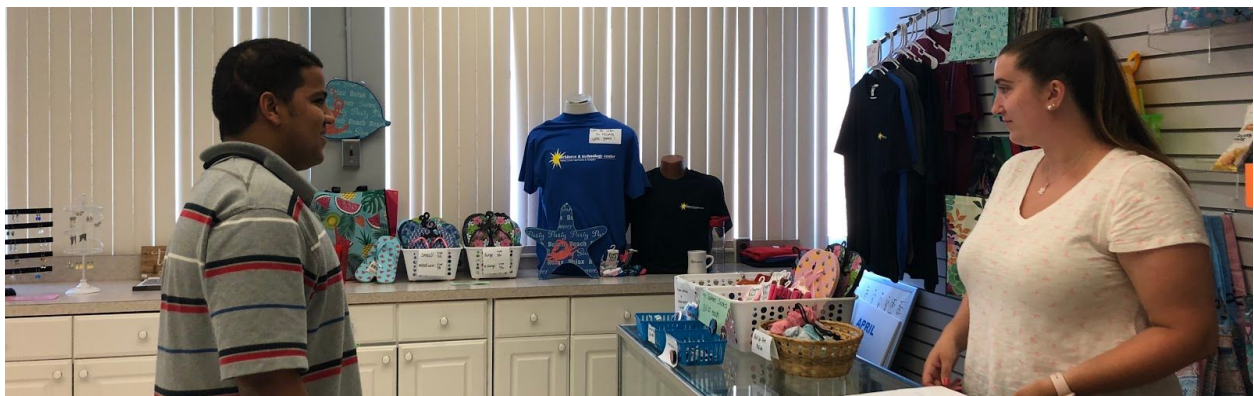
Harley started with DORS in May after struggling to complete high school. He was referred by his field counselor for a career assessment which shone a light on his gifts and abilities including a penchant for entertainment. Like many of us, Harley considers it important to contribute meaningfully to a team telling others, “just because you have a disability doesn't mean you are not ready and able to work.” He and his counselor agreed that the Work Readiness Programs at WTC would be a good next step on Harley's vocational path.

As WBL sites were being assigned, Harley requested to be at McKenna's. His skills and abilities shown through in class and exploring retail seemed a natural fit. This was perfect timing for Harley as by now, WTC has not only given McKenna's Corner a facelift, but the store itself has been tailored to meet key components of a Comprehensive WBL Program as defined by the U.S. Department of Education Education's National Center for Innovation in Career and Technical Education. Those key components are the alignment of classroom and workplace learning (check); application of academic, technical, and employability skills in a work setting (check); and support from classroom or workplace mentors. Check!

With the benefit of multiple support services under one roof, WTC can take a holistic approach to the rehabilitative process. Consumers get individual needs met (disability-related and otherwise) in the form of additional support from the Academic, Center Counseling, Medical/Health & Wellness, Enrichment, Employment, and Assistive Technology Departments. “This program has helped me overcome my past,” Harley touts. “WTC has been a great opportunity. They gave me a chance when no one else would.”

Harley has moved on to the CVS Training Program where he is thriving and credits his time at McKenna's as a contributing factor to his success. Just a few weeks into training Harley is already getting job offers. While shopping near home, he tells salespeople at Target and Best Buy about his time at WTC. “I told them about ‘forward-facing product’ and the managers wanted to hire me on the spot” he beams. Prior to WTC he had four interviews that led nowhere. Now at the end of one of the biggest investments he could make in himself, Harley is seeing payoff. When asked if he is considering those offers Harley says no, that he is considering the CVS Registered Apprenticeship for Store Managers. He smiles with confidence, “I don't listen to what people say.”

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Eric works with a DORS volunteer to develop new talents as a retail salesperson.

Students are regularly stopping staff to ask if they can be next to work in the store. One such student is Eric Andrews. His advice? “Honestly care less about what people say.” Eric cites his two main motivations. Family first and foremost is a huge source of encouragement. Second is tenacity. “They may see that I have use of only one hand, but I like proving them all wrong,” Eric states.

Eric sustained an injury at 14 that caused partial paralysis and memory deficits. He first came to WTC in January for a career assessment which recommended the Work Readiness Program and an evaluation to get a better understanding of his physical capacities. Work Readiness was an ideal pre-training option where Eric could explore common work-world scenarios from handling transportation issues to taking feedback at work “People should not underestimate what a person can do. They may turn around and surprise you” he warns.

The original goal of the store was to provide WBL for students, and in a very short amount of time the program blossomed. Students from the Work Readiness, Starbucks, and CVS Retail Training Programs come to work in McKenna’s with other programs lining up to

follow suit. Eric has taken charge of shop duties including stocking items on shelves, counting inventory, assisting customers, and tidying up. Eric gives some sage advice from someone who has seen, experienced, and accomplished a lot in his short 20 years. “Keep going,” he says. “Never give up.”

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All purchases and donations benefit the “Friends of WTC,” a 501c3 nonprofit that provides assistance and opportunities to students receiving services while at the WTC.

