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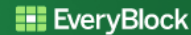
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Hidden treasures

Online resale shop provides adults with disabilities meaningful work

By LORRAINE SWANSON, Contributing Writer

When it came time to think about creating another social enterprise, the Neumann Association didn't want to launch just another storefront resale shop like so many other non-profit organizations.

Theirs had to be innovative and out-of-the-box. It had to be lean and mean, with little overhead. It had to be global without leaving Ravenswood. Most important, it had to provide employment opportunities for its 500 hardworking and talented adult clients with developmental disabilities and mental illness.

Welcome to "Neu-To-U," the Neumann Association's virtual resale shop available on eBay. Launched in September with a donation of "a truckload of Beanie Babies" and a digital camera, Neu-To-U has been tearing up eBay ever since.

Buyers can purchase such items as Smash Box and Chanel cosmetics, gently used brand name items and other goods without leaving their home or office, or wading through racks of musty clothes like at other resale shops.

In exchange, proceeds from buyers' purchases help support Neumann's 23 residences, case management, clinical and medical services that help its clients remain independent and productive members of the community.

"It's always challenging to get a new business or social enterprise off the ground," said Eileen Durkin, CEO of Neumann Association. "One of the nice things about eBay is it doesn't cost a lot. We've put very few resources into it. What we're trying to do is to prepare clients to work at various jobs that will be available over the next few years, including e-commerce which is growing."

Faye Malicay, 33, a client who is employed by the Neumann Association, never thought she'd become the official staff photographer for Neu-To-U. Before the enterprise was launched last fall, she was shredding paper for Neumann's human resources department.

"At first I was weirded out," Malicay said. "I didn't know what to do. 'What is this eBay thing?' I was scared. Now I've gotten pretty much used to it."

"Faye has a real artistic flair," said Neumann job coach Kara Mannix. "When we started with the Beanie Babies, we had lots of different colors and different colored backdrops that Faye arranged for the photography."

So taken with the Neu-To-U virtual resale shop, the Illinois State Treasurer's office recently hired another Neumann client, Michael McCluskie, 43, as a photographer for its own online eBay enterprise.

McCluskie, of Jefferson Park, described by staff at Neumann as being fiercely independent, pays his own bills and gets himself around the city by mass transit.



Neu-To-Me

Neumann Association at 5547 N. Ravenswood Ave., accepts brand-new and gently used items for its virtual resale shop. To access, visit www.ebay.com. Click on "advanced search" under sellers and type in "neutou" (no hypens).

Donated items are tax deductible. Dropping items off at Neumann Association's Ravenswood headquarters is preferred, but Neumann can also pick up donated goods. Proceeds benefit Neumann's services for adults with developmental disabilities and mental illness.

If you are a donor, wholesaler or business looking to donate or sell goods for the online resale shop, or hire Neumann clients, contact Colleen Rosa, development director, by phone at (773) 769-4313, by email at crosa@vcna.org; or visit www.neumannassociation.org.

"Gently used Coach bags are good," said Neumann CEO Eileen Durkin.

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Currently, McCluskie divides his time between his two other part-time jobs at Starbuck's and a sheltered workshop photographing jewelry, silver certificates, rare coins and other unclaimed contents from safety deposit boxes for the state treasurer's office.

"I like doing stuff with my hands," said McCluskie, who wore a suit for his News-Star photo op. "At first it was hard to focus the camera."

Michelle Johann, career services coordinator for Neumann, says that McCluskie is one of the agency's hardest workers.

"If we had 10 more jobs Michael will work every day of the week," said Michelle Johann, career services coordinator for Neumann. "The employment provides him with the opportunity to be as independent as possible."

Neumann does an extensive vocational evaluation for new clients, discussing their career goals and gauging their talents to provide jobs that will be a good fit for both employer and employee.

"We want to give our people the opportunity to perform the kind of work that they want to do and are capable of performing," Durkin said. "Part of the challenge is to have a variety of work that our clients can do so they can explore their talents. We try to mirror the general population."

One of the biggest challenges is securing new employers who can provide disabled workers with living wage jobs that provide benefits.

"It's hard in our tough economy," Johann said. "We have a job developer that goes out into the community to make connections with businesses. We go with jobs that (Neumann clients) are interested in as well as carving out positions that weren't there to begin with to meet that need."

Neumann also provides a job club where clients employed outside the center can meet with mentors, socialize and air other concerns that they might be encountering in the workplace.

"One of the challenges when you work outside in the community is getting people to accept you as a peer so that you can socialize with them if they're going out for drinks on a Friday night or lunch on a Friday afternoon," Durkin said. "Being included in that isn't something that always happens. We try to provide that support here and that's one of the next big barriers."

About 100 clients who receive supportive services from Neumann, including its career placement services, are employed by the agency and other businesses in the surrounding community, including Starbucks, Devon Market and St. Gregory High School.

Businesses that employ disabled workers can get tax credits, in addition to some great employees.

"They're hard workers," Johann said. "They want to work and feel productive but don't always have the same opportunities. They're very willing, ready and able to jump in."

In addition to Neu-To-Me, the organization operates another self-supporting social enterprise called Neumann Neighbors. Clients of the center have worked on community beautification projects and light maintenance chores for various neighborhood Special Service Area districts and more recently, neighborhood condominium associations.

"Sometimes when you're looking for a job for so long, you're grateful for the chance to demonstrate your capabilities," said Durkin. "There tends to be a loyalty that goes along with that work environment."

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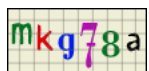
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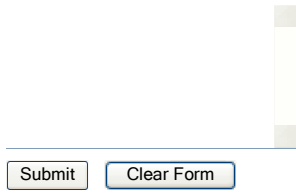
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