

Employers, Listen Up: The Deaf Can Work

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Employers once turned a deaf ear when someone with a hearing impairment applied for a job.

But that's beginning to change.

Not necessarily because of requirements that will be imposed on employers under the new Americans with Disabilities Act, but because employers are recognizing that the disabled—including the deaf and hearing-impaired—make dedicated employees.

"Employers need workers who don't have an attitude problem, who like to help people, and who like working," said Victoria Vitullo of the Virginia Department of Rehabilitative Services.

"All employers are searching for that. My clients are those people. . . . They have a good work ethic."

Miss Vitullo's office, which assists deaf and hearing-impaired people in seven counties, is based in Manassas.

Since going to work there in February as a rehabilitation counselor, she has helped six Winchester-area residents to find jobs.

Two are seasonal workers at Jim Barnett Park, and one is a custodian for O'Sullivan Corp. Two work in restaurants, one cooking for a McDonald's, and the other stocking the food bar at the Western Steer on U.S. 522 North. Another upholsters furniture at a business operated by a man who is also deaf.

Mike Thompson, the superintendent of recreation at Jim Barnett Park, said he couldn't ask for two better workers than Bucky Lockhart, a caretaker for Christianson Familyland, and Linda Kester, a children's camp counselor.

He will soon introduce Lockhart, 23, who has been deaf



Star Photo by Scott Mason

Hearing-impaired camp counselor Linda Kester uses sign language to communicate with her young charges.

since birth, and Miss Kester, 18, who has used hearing aids since she was 4, to the Parks and Recreation Board as exemplary employees.

"They have become two of the best two workers we've ever had," Thompson said.

"I don't have to tell them anything. They're very responsible. They take initiative. They don't have to be told what to do or when to do it. They don't like sitting."

Thompson invited employers

who have questions about hiring the deaf and hearing-impaired to call him. "Deaf people are no different than hearing people. They can do anything but hear."

"Their work habits are fantastic. They take great pride in their work. If the employers of Winchester won't hire them, that's good for me, because I will." Miss Kester believes the public sometimes has the wrong perception about deafness, and should think of it as more of a cultural difference or a different

way of communicating.

"Some people still think it's a disease," she said.

A recent graduate of the Model Secondary School for the Deaf in Washington, Miss Kester will begin classes this fall at Gallaudet College, a liberal arts school for the deaf.

With hearing aids, she has more than 50 percent hearing. The cause of her hearing loss is not known, and it has worsened as she has grown older—but her speech is flawless.

They want to know what it means to be deaf or hard of hearing.

"They ask me so many questions. I love it because it gives them awareness and they don't grow up very prejudiced. It's a good way of teaching them."

Lockhart was valedictorian at the Romney School for the Deaf in West Virginia. According to his vocational evaluation, he is good at everything he has ever tried to do.

He attended college for one semester of college, but left because he prefers working with his hands.

He has applied for a job with Du Pont's paints and finishes plant near Front Royal, and has made it through the first two steps of the hiring process, including interviews, with flying colors.

Thompson said he would like to hire Lockhart for a permanent full-time job when one becomes available.

Thompson said he decided to hire hearing-impaired employees after overhearing a conversation between Miss Vitullo and his friend Dave Vannoy, the owner of the Western Steer restaurants in Winchester and Stephens City.

Vannoy hired one of Miss Vitullo's clients, and Thompson hired two.

Thompson has also been learning sign language so he can better communicate with Lockhart, and the Winchester Parks and Recreation Department is seeking funding for a Telecommunications Device for the Deaf.

A borrowed TDD has been installed, and hearing-impaired people who use them may call the department's office at 662-4946 for information about programs and hours.

Thompson said his commi-

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