

Working at job success

Group eases employment for people with disabilities

By: Kevin Rollason

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Clockwise from left: Mary Lawson, Michelle Norris, Lori Hurtig and Val Whettell.

MARY LAWSON had been out of the job market for 13 years when she decided to get back into the workforce.

Lawson was diagnosed with epilepsy in 1968 when she was 16, and began working at a local department store in 1971.

Her seizures had been controlled by medication until 1987, when she was forced to leave her job because of the seizures and to look after her parents.

But now that Lawson had decided to look for a job she faced the scary prospect of putting together her first resumé in 13 years and going through her first job interview in years.

Reaching E-Quality Employment Services, or REES for short, gave Lawson the confidence -- and the skills -- she needed to get back into the workforce.

Lawson has since been employed by Sears for nine years.

"It was such a positive experience," Lawson recalled recently.

"I went to all their services. Now I want to give back so I am volunteering for them."

Frank Rossi, the manager of the Sears store where Lawson works, has nothing but praise for his employee.

"She's a great person and she works hard," Rossi said.

"She came prepared for the interview and came in with a good attitude. She didn't have preferential treatment."

REES is a local organization that helps people with disabilities or health conditions attain employment by giving them job counselling. It now sees 500 people each year.

"What REES does is enable people with disabilities to be included as full citizens in all aspects of community life, whether economic or social," said Teresa Andreychuk, the organization's executive director.

"What's the first question people ask when they meet? It's what do you do. REES empowers people to do as much as they can and enables them to answer that question."

REES was formed in 1989, when Reaching Out Employment and E-Quality Employment joined to become REES. Its first location was downtown at 294 Portage Ave., but it has since moved to its current location at 1200 Portage Ave.

REES's office houses a classroom with computers and offices for staff and to interview clients.

REES offers assistance for people who are deaf or hard of hearing with all services in American Sign Language.

REES also offers workshops for disability awareness, job accommodation and hiring and managing people with disabilities. It offers its services to managers, unions, human resources people and both large and small businesses.

Lawson said REES even had her do a simulated job interview, which they videotaped, to show her what she did right or wrong.

"It was scary being interviewed -- I hadn't had an interview in 25 years," she said.

"It was so realistic. But it got me my job. I love working where I work."

Lori Hurtig, manager of community relations, said the people REES works with have disabilities, or they have health conditions including asthma and respiratory conditions or the effects from a past stroke.

"It's any type of permanent health condition," Hurtig said.

"We get a mixture of people straight from school with disabilities or with acquired disabilities later in life."

Val Whettell, a REES volunteer, said the organization decided a few years ago to add health conditions to the list of people they help because many of them also need accommodations put into the workplace to allow them to work.

"Diabetes is not a disability, but there may be accommodations needed in the workplace," Whettell said.

"We believe there's a job for everyone regardless of their circumstances or disability. It's just finding that right fit."

Michelle Norris, president of REES' board of directors, said she learned the value of the organization when she was looking for help when a person with a hearing disability came for an interview at the government department she works in.

"The candidate's first language was sign language and their second language was French," Norris said. "REES helped me out and the person is still employed with us and has been promoted."

Norris said REES also gave her colleagues basic sign language skills and suggested installing a light in their office that could go on when a fire alarm was pulled.

Norris said she joined REES's board and is now the president because REES "really helped us out and I like to give back."

Norris said the organization is holding its REES Awards, Celebrating the Stars, on Feb. 18. Tickets cost \$125 per person and a partial tax receipt can be given upon request. For more information on the event, or REES itself, call 832-REES (7337) or TTY 947-3480.

Empowering Winnipeggers

REES offers several services including:

"ö A hiring-incentive project, which will pay unemployed people with physical disabilities for 80 hours of on-the-job training to help determine the persons ability to perform the job duties or identify what changes in the workplace would be possible to accommodate them.

"ö An enhanced internship training project to give 12 weeks of paid internship training for people with physical disabilities to help with the transition to meaningful employment.

"ö Youth employment project for people aged 17 to 29 with a self-declared physical disability or health condition which includes nine weeks of basic computer skill training and three months of on-the-job training and support.

"ö Recruitment assistance to help refer or match employees with employers, including free job accommodation and accessibility information.

kevin.rollason@freepress.mb.ca