

## **An Inclusive and Welcoming Spirit Guides Success at Community Living Algoma**

Community Living Algoma (CLA) exemplifies the values its staff hold dearly. And thanks to two blossoming employees, it is filling organizational needs while spreading the spirit of inclusion the minute someone walks through the door.

CLA provides a range of services and supports to individuals living with developmental disabilities and autism to enable them to live, work and play independently in the community. The organization has been providing supports and services since 1954 to more than 900 people in the Algoma District through offices in Sault Ste. Marie, Hornepayne, Wawa and Elliot Lake.

But not only is CLA a service provider, it is also an employer. And like most employers these days, it struggles to find skilled, qualified staff to fill vacancies. Fortunately, CLA knows firsthand how to find reliable, quality employees. So when an important job vacancy arose, Hannah and Will – two individuals with disabilities – were recruited as quickly as possible.

CLA had needed to staff the Welcome Centre reception area in its Sault Ste. Marie office. The job required somebody to greet visitors, triage their request, help guide them to the area or person they needed, answer phones, take care of the mail and help with events.

Hannah had gained experience as a student in CLA's summer employment program, so her top-notch skills were well known to the organization; and Will was also recommended by CLA staff who knew of his abilities. The bustling job was divided in two, with Will working the morning shift and Hannah working the afternoon shift.

Both Hannah and Will rapidly adapted to the job. Employment support workers from CLA organized the job into several separate tasks and worked to teach them the various job components. Staff shadowed and supervised them as they adapted and learned the jobs. It didn't take long before they were both able to effectively and efficiently complete the required tasks without any supervision or accommodation.

Hannah and Will have proven themselves to be reliable, conscientious and dependable employees, and a real benefit to the employer. Hiring them has enabled CLA to develop and sustain a diverse workplace reflecting the community it serves. And importantly, each brings unique skill sets that have proven incredibly valuable to the organization.

"Both Will and Hannah bring unique perspectives and problem-solving skills that help CLA think outside the box when approaching challenges," says Kira Beall, Advocacy and Inclusion Coordinator at CLA. "They demonstrate a strong attention to detail in

their administrative tasks, but more importantly to the workplace they foster an environment in which all employees not only thrive, but also feel valued.”

Nicole Clark, Executive Assistant at CLA, says Hannah and Will not only met their expectations for the job, they excelled and soon took on more responsibilities.

“As we uncovered more and more of Hannah and Will's remarkable abilities and unique gifts, we have broadened their roles, incorporating ongoing professional development to further enhance their approach in greeting, customer service and hospitality,” says Clark. “This approach not only enriches our workplace, but also fosters their personal growth and enhances their overall employee satisfaction.”

But, Hannah and Will's success at CLA is much more than doing their work tasks diligently. They have brought the workplace something much more valuable.

“It is with their kindness, their genuine interest in getting to know people and their commitment to the mission of the organization that make Hannah and Will essential to CLA's success,” says Beall.

It is a sentiment strongly seconded by Clark.

“Hannah and Will have significantly enriched our office, setting a powerful tone for what belonging is all about within our office culture. Their warm and friendly personalities, combined with their roles as the welcoming faces of our organization – greeting both guests and employees – exemplify the inclusive and welcoming spirit we cherish,” says Clark.

By hiring skilled and capable people with disabilities, CLA is successfully finding the best talent during a time of significant labour shortages throughout Ontario. And at the same time, it is enhancing its reputation as a top inclusive employer while reflecting the diverse population of the District of Algoma.

### **Myth: workplace accommodations are always expensive**

One of the most persistent myths that many employers believe is that it is costly to accommodate employees with disabilities. In fact, according to employers participating in a recent study by the Job Accommodation Network – a service from the U.S. Department of Labor's Office of Disability Employment Policy – about 50 per cent of accommodations cost employers absolutely nothing to make, about 43 per cent of employers experienced just a one-time cost, and only about 7 per cent of accommodations resulted in an ongoing, annual cost to the company. Furthermore, of

those accommodations that did have a one-time cost, the average one-time expenditure for the employer was US\$300.

For most of the people who do need accommodations, they consist of minor changes. The most common adjustments are job redesign (i.e. modified work hours, modified work duties, remote work, etc.), or (as in the case with Will and Hannah) breaking the job down into discrete components then supporting the employee to learn and master each component. Through these simple techniques CLA gave Will and Hannah the opportunity to succeed, and now both are able to work completely independently.