

San Jose Mercury News

Autistic lab worker flourishes at biomedical company

December 2014

Project Search offers training programs to help young adults with developmental disabilities overcome the odds to obtain employment. **By Joe Rodriguez**

SAN JOSE — Alex Go lifted the sealed medical boxes from Italy and Spain, then placed them softly onto a small counter. They contained dozens of vials of blood from expectant mothers seeking information about the health of their babies. Go is the first one at Ariosia Diagnostics, a global prenatal testing company, to handle the vials.



“We have lots of specimens but very little space,” he said with a smile. It wasn’t a gripe as much as a nice problem to have for both the growing San Jose company and the 22-year-old autistic laboratory worker.

Not too long ago, adults with autism rarely held sensitive jobs like this, if they ever got them at all. They are now beginning to break through thanks to efforts like Project Search, a 9-month-old, hands-on training program run by Hope Services, a nonprofit agency. Project Search trains young adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities, including autism and cerebral palsy, for competitive, entry-level jobs in the medical field. “It is not a typical job individuals with a disability would qualify for,” said Robin Doran, a Hope spokeswoman.

Hope Services hopes that Wish Book readers can help raise \$30,000 to cover on-the-job training for a class of 12 at Kaiser San Jose medical center

Go was in the project’s first class in 2013 at Lucile Packard Children’s Hospital. The idea for Project Search goes back to 1996, when emergency room nurse Erin Riehle took a critical look at Cincinnati Children’s Hospital Medical Center. Many of the entry-level jobs suffered high turnover rates. And since the hospital served a lot of disabled children, she asked, wouldn’t it make sense to hire disabled employees?

From that light-bulb moment, the idea has spread to 200 sites in the United States, Canada, England, Scotland and Australia. Hope Service’s version of Project Search ranked highest in job placement among the 17 sites in California.

Back in 1996, Go was a preschooler who rarely spoke. And autism was much less understood than now. Although his parents were medical doctors, they accepted a diagnosis that he was merely “language impaired” and tried to find him the best help available. That wasn’t easy.

When therapists and school counselors tried to interview him, the boy just sat there and said nothing. His mother, Dr. Joyce Kobori, said her young son bounced from one public school and special education program to the next. He couldn’t carry on a simple conversation. Nothing seemed to work well.

“When he was very young, we weren’t at all confident that he would ever find success as an adult,” she said. “He never seemed to fit in.”

Then she and her husband, Dr. Mateo Go, enrolled him at Stanbridge Academy, a private school in San Mateo for children with mild to moderate learning disabilities. Alex did better there and made some lasting friendships. But

he still needed continuing education, and he lacked such basic living skills as cooking for himself and washing clothes.

“We were about to throw our hands up,” Kober said when a therapist suggested testing her son, who was then 18, for autism. Go tested positive for a mild form of the disorder.

According to the Centers for Disease Control, 1 in every 150 children in the United States is autistic. Although the disorder hits more boys than girls, it’s an equal opportunity disability, affecting children of all racial, ethnic and socioeconomic groups. Symptoms include lack or loss of language, sensory impairment, obsessive behavior and difficulty with social interaction.

However, adults in the autism spectrum also bring such special talents as intense focus, and they’re really good at repetitive work — two skills valued by labs and hospitals. On the flip side, labs and hospitals are very social environments that can channel socially challenged autistic employees into personal discussions, group meetings and social events.

After high school, Go enrolled at West Valley College in Saratoga, where he heard about Project Search. His parents encouraged him to go for it.

The program gave him hands-on training at Lucile Packard Children’s Hospital, where he filed papers, scanned documents and stocked supplies. As a summer intern at Ariosa and in his first job there, he sanitized eye wear and other equipment. Impressed supervisors promoted him to a much more sensitive job: receiving blood specimens for analysis.

About six lab technicians push the specimens through the first stages of analysis, which take about a week. In fact, they say Go sets the pace for their unit.

“When he’s gone, we really suffer,” said co-worker Caitlyn Jones, adding that Go’s extraordinary attention to detail extends even to their mandatory breaks for stretching. “He’s the only one who remembers on time.”

His supervisor, Dianna Bond-Hatch, said Go is gradually making friends and fitting in. He is scheduled to move into his own apartment nearby, a milestone that should build his confidence even more. Advanced training and even a college degree are not out of the question. Go has reached a point where he can think about his future.

“That’s the hard part,” he said. “I’ll find my way through the new process, but right now I’m very happy and I’m looking forward to having my own place.”

FOR MORE INFORMATION

To learn more about Hope Services and Project Search, visit www.hopeservices.org.

Hope Services’ Project Search program provides on-the-job medical training for young adults with development disabilities. Each donation will help Hope Services raise \$30,000 to cover on-the-job training for a class of 12 at Kaiser San Jose Medical center.