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Defying expectations

San Mateo nonprofit One Step Beyond offers training, confidence to adults with disabilities

By Anna Schuessler Daily Journal staff

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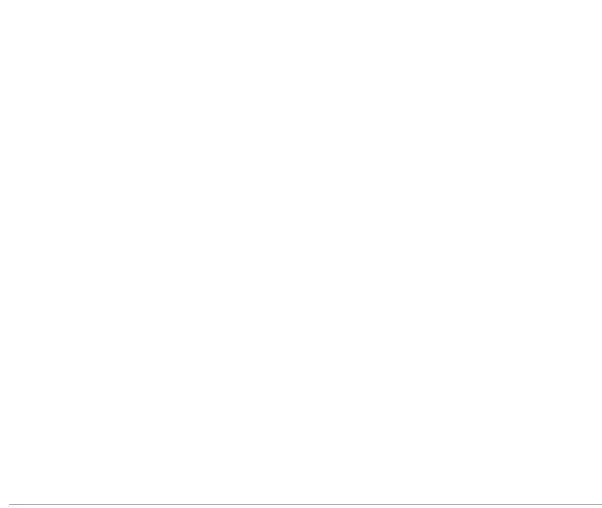


From left: Elizabeth, Rachael, Emmy, Jed Calano and Benji practice playing in a band at the San Mateo nonprofit One Step Beyond. Some 15 years ago, mother-daughter duo Mimi Rogers and Madison Rogers-Blanton started providing programs for young adults with intellectual disabilities in Glendale, Arizona and in 2016, began offering services in the nonprofit's San Mateo location.

Anna Schuessler/Daily Journal

On Friday nights, it's not unusual to find a vibrant group of young adults letting a week's worth of hard work slide off with a couple hours of dancing at the San Mateo nonprofit One Step Beyond.

Whether it's working with young adults with intellectual disabilities to cook for a crowd or play an instrument in a band, the nonprofit's second-floor 25th Avenue office is often buzzing with activity. But for Madison Rogers-Blanton, the nonprofit's executive director, there's something different about Friday Fun Nights, when the some 30 program participants are joined by others with disabilities to enjoy the end of the week, just like any group of young adults would.



“There's something about just turning off the lights, putting on music and dancing, it's just magical,” she said.

Also including trips to the bowling alley and movies, Friday Fun Nights are an easy favorite for those who come to One Step Beyond most weekdays between 9 a.m. and 3 p.m., said Rogers-Blanton. With a focus on finding ways for program participants to integrate with their community, Rogers-Blanton said trips to the grocery store, volunteer work at other nonprofits and other trips into the community are ingrained into their daily activities.

As a contractor with the Golden Gate Regional Center, a state-funded nonprofit serving individuals with developmental disabilities in Marin, San Francisco and San Mateo counties, Rogers-Blanton said One Step Beyond works with individuals who are 22 years of age or older to provide opportunities for those who are no longer in school.

Though several programs throughout the Bay Area are available to individuals with autism, Down syndrome and other behavioral challenges, Rogers-Blanton said One Step Beyond focuses not only on providing meaningful learning opportunities for its participants but also setting future goals for them, whether it's employment or living independently.

“A lot of parents will say just the fact that my daughter or son comes to the program and I know that they're actually going out into the community and not just staying at a program center all day long is the best thing,” she said.

Having grown up with an older sister who has Down syndrome, Rogers-Blanton knows how limited the options available to individuals with disabilities can be. Challenges with staying on task, picking up on social cues and a lack of support or training are among the obstacles individuals with these types of disabilities face while they are in a traditional education system. But these challenges can become barriers to independent living and job opportunities when they graduate, which is where One Step Beyond can play a role, said Rogers-Blanton.

In the two years since the nonprofit has opened its doors in San Mateo, it has formed partnerships with organizations like the Habitat for Humanity ReStore in San Carlos, the Samaritan House in San Mateo and Big Wave Farm in Half Moon Bay to create volunteer opportunities for program participants and help them experience what holding a job is like. Activities like cooking lunch for the group or filing papers and answering phones in the office also help program participants build skills they can use in jobs in the food service or administrative industries, she said.

Rogers-Blanton said the nonprofit is working toward finding paid job opportunities for its program participants in the next year, but she'll need to find additional space for the expansion. Having operated day programs for some 15 years, the organization is no stranger to expanding its services, explained Rogers-Blanton. She said her mother, Mimi Rogers, opened the nonprofit's first day program in Glendale, Arizona in 2003 to see if she could provide opportunities for her sister Dylan Rogers beyond what other day programs could provide.

Rogers-Blanton was in high school when her mother, the nonprofit's founder, started creating the program and remembers what it was like to think about her sister's options after high school, which she said felt was limited to day programs that would keep her occupied with activities but not necessarily prepare her for independent living or a job down the road. Now that the program has grown to serve more than 400 individuals at three campuses in the Phoenix area, Rogers-Blanton said the nonprofit's San Mateo location is its first step to scaling the programs they've developed nationally.

Word about One Step Beyond's music programs, job training and community-based activities has spread to the point where Rogers-Blanton estimates she receives a referral a day. But the rising cost of operations in the Bay Area is cause for concern for Rogers-Blanton, who wonders about the nonprofit's ability to expand or offer the enriching programs beyond its standard set of services.

"I think the scariest part about it is we are full now, we're at capacity," she said. "But yet there are still hundreds of individuals with disabilities who are graduating just this year and are going to need programs like ours."

Between reimbursements from the Golden Gate Regional Center, a team of dedicated volunteers and contributions from local donors, the nonprofit is able to support its activities, said the nonprofit's director of philanthropic development Jon Petersmeyer. He added that in-kind donations, such as a van One Step Beyond can use to transport program participants, can often make a big difference in what the organization is able to offer.

For 27-year-old Half Moon Bay resident Emmy, who has been participating in the program since it started operations in San Mateo, being able to play bass in a band and try cheerleading with a volunteer are among the activities she's enjoyed. Though she lives with her family now, Emmy is on a path to living independently with roommates in the coming months, Rogers-Blanton said.

"I think this program gets me to a point where I'm like, 'OK, I can do this,'" she said. "You know, sometimes it's not as easy as we all think ... there's certain days where I get frustrated or upset and, you know, you just have to find a way to be happy, but sometimes that's the hard part."

You can find One Step Beyond's San Mateo office at 126 W. 25th Ave., Suite 202. Visit osbi.org/community-integration-california/ for more information.

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