

READY TO GROW: Workforce Partners in the Spotlight

Designing a workplace for employees of all abilities: Where everybody shines

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Established just one year ago, in March 2023, Redefining Independence NFP has been rolling out an important mission every day since: To provide a supported workplace and ensure individuals of all abilities can work side-by-side in a community job setting.

Retired local educators and co-founders Susan Converse and Kristine Ellsworth have joined together with a vision for successfully fulfilling Redefining Independence’s mission. It is one where individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities have access to meaningful employment with appropriate support, a connection to the community, and a greater sense of purpose and belonging.

“This inclusive employment environment will help to fill gaps in adult services,” noted Converse, “while also enriching the lives of individuals with disabilities through the development of social, vocational and educational connections in their community.”

Initial project goals, in addition to the supported programming, includes a facility for them to work at, Converse said further. The facility will be known as Rae’s Café.

A public informational meeting is planned for Tuesday, April 16 at 6:30 p.m. at Edwardsville High School Commons where anyone can come in and learn more.

“Everyone is welcome at our first public meeting,” said Converse. “We encourage everyone to come join in the conversation as we share about the origin, mission, and vision of Rae’s Café and our nonprofit, Redefining Independence.”

There will be information, committee and volunteer opportunities, as well as more on how to financially partner with the nonprofit. “We’d love to see you there and can’t wait to partner with you as the vision of Rae’s Café becomes reality,” she added.

RSVPs are encouraged but not required. Anyone interested can follow and respond through their two Facebook pages, Redefining Independence NFP and Rae’s Café.

Undoubtedly, there are readers who

may already recognize Susan Converse’s name among noted innovators in workforce development. She previously left an indelible mark by founding Edwardsville High School’s Tiger Den Coffee Shop during her time as a special education teacher in the district.

For those who are unfamiliar with Edwardsville High School’s Tiger Den, it is a coffee shop that’s located inside the high school. “It’s designed to be a vocational training program for students with cognitive disabilities and autism, and it’s completely student run, autonomous and staffed by students with disabilities,” explained Converse.

The students who work in the Tiger Den are “a diverse group” that includes students with, and without, disabilities. There are students with no disabilities, some with mild disabilities, and some with significant disabilities – all working side-by-side.

Converse was also named Illinois Education Association’s 2019 Teacher of the Year. She retired from Edwardsville School District in June 2022, and has since partnered with Kristine Ellsworth and their board of directors to advance the vision and mission of Redefining Independence out of what Converse has noted as being a noticeable gap in local services as well as a great need for the workforce.

Ellsworth resides in Glen Carbon with her husband John and two children, Cameron and Jennie. She was a teacher for 24 years before retiring from Riverview Gardens School District in St. Louis.

“I met Kris when Cameron was a student in my vocational training class, the Tiger Den at Edwardsville High School in 2016,” said Converse. “I invited Kris to help out in the Tiger Den program as a parent volunteer in 2017. Kris and I began talking about the need for similar supported work places at the community level for adults with disabilities, as she navigated the supports available to Cameron when he aged out of the school system in 2018 at age 22.” Ellsworth is now serving as the executive director for Redefining Independence NFP.

The nonprofit’s board members, in addition to Converse, include Rachel Aldrich,

Denise Byrd, Jennie Ellsworth, Kaysie Gruenkemeyer and Sharla McGinnis.

“All board members have either worked in the special education field or have a close family member with a disability, or both,” said Converse. “It is not a board requirement, but if you work or live with an individual with a disability, you witness firsthand the challenges they face and the lack of opportunities available to them.

“It is not surprising, therefore, that these are the individuals who want to step up and address these challenges,” she added.

A continual and mutually shared goal both then and now, and moving forward: To create a supported employment center in the community for individuals with disabilities. Enter Rae’s Café: Where everybody shines.

Redefining Independence is affiliated with the Madison County Transition Planning Committee (TPC), Converse explained further, which is overseen by the Madison County Regional Office of Education’s transition team. The ROE team is composed of prevocational coordinators from local school districts as well as from agencies that provide services to young adults with disabilities as they transition out of the school system as adults.

“Additionally, we are interested in establishing partnerships with the postsecondary institutions in our area, and with local employers,” Converse said. “We plan to provide services to adults with disabilities aged 22 and older. “Job coaching will also be provided on-site, and additional outside job placements may occur, as appropriate.

“Although our first project will be a restaurant, we do not consider Rae’s Cafe to necessarily be a stopping point for employment, but an avenue for individuals to learn general vocational skills that can be transferred to other jobs, as well,” she added.

“In my experience running the Tiger Den Coffee Shop, I was able to help students discover their talents and interests and then connect them to an appropriate employer,” Converse said further. “For example, one of my students had no interest in food service, but through his work in the coffee shop, he demonstrated a strong



Susan Converse, co-founder of Redefining Independence NFP and Rae’s Café, is a retired special education teacher from Edwardsville School District. Named the Illinois Education Association’s Teacher of the Year in 2019, Converse is also noted for founding the Tiger Den Coffee Shop at Edwardsville High School.

desire for organization and order. This led to a job placement at a local library, which he loved. Another student who was very sociable was placed with a local nursing home with the Activities Director.”

Redefining Independence NFP and Rae’s Café are still looking for a physical home at this time. Converse pointed out, “We have a strong desire to stay in Edwardsville, as we see Rae’s Cafe as an adult extension of the Tiger Den at Edwardsville High School, but we have not secured a property at this point.

“We just received our charity designation from the IRS at the end of January and are anxious to move forward with our project,” she continued. “We hope to be up and running at this time next year,” regarding physical location and operations.

Converse closed with these thoughts: “We hope that our employment model will become a standard for other businesses. There is an incredible workforce out there that is currently untapped and should be utilized.”

Boone Center Inc. expands disability employment services into southwestern Illinois

Boone Center Inc. (BCI), a nonprofit that provides employment opportunities for adults with disabilities, has expanded programming into the state of Illinois, focusing on Madison, St. Clair, and Monroe Counties.

The expansion was approved in late January by the Illinois Department of Human Services, Division of Rehabilitation Services.

Headquartered in St. Peters, Mo., BCI has been a forefront provider of comprehensive employment services for individuals with disabilities. The expansion into Illinois emphasizes the organization’s commitment to bridging the gap between employers and job seekers while fostering inclusivity and independence across the region.

“BCI is committed to leading the greater St. Louis region’s workforce development efforts by facilitating the training and inclusive hiring of adults with disabilities,” said BCI CEO Troy Compardo. “We couldn’t embark on this journey without the commitment of communities and employers, and

we’re excited to bring our programming to the Metro East with an anchor partner in World Wide Technology’s logistics team in Edwardsville.”

BCI offers tailored employment solutions, recognizing the uniqueness of each individual and matching their skills and abilities with suitable jobs. The programs involve collaboration with local businesses to offer a wide range of employment opportunities across various industries. BCI’s services also include ongoing support to ensure sustained success for individuals in the workforce, including navigating Social Security benefits.

“We are excited for this opportunity to provide more service options for the Metro East to meet the community’s demand,” said BCI Chief Program Officer of Competitive Employment Matt Jannings. “These services are dependent upon cultivating strong partnerships with industry to find quality matches for those we serve. Employers who are looking for employee recruitment and retention models should pay close attention, as this can be the

start to a positive cultural overhaul.”

BCI has achieved significant outcomes in helping adults with disabilities gain competitive integrated employment throughout the greater St. Louis region. In 2023 alone, BCI facilitated the employment of over 100 individuals through traditional employment services and direct placement. Furthermore, since launching the BCI Skills Center in 2019, 88 individuals have graduated from these customized vocational training programs and moved directly into the competitive work market.

“BCI’s commitment to serve the Metro East is rooted in our organization’s vision to eliminate barriers to meaningful employment for adults with disabilities,” added Compardo. “Our expansion into Illinois will offer those communities unique programming to unlock the potential of one the area’s largest populations who are unemployed or under-employed.”

For more information about BCI’s employment programs in Missouri and Illinois, visit <https://boonecenter.com/> or call (636) 875-5264.



Mason, who lives with a disability, entered the warehousing field and earned his forklift certification under the guidance of BCI. As part of its Illinois expansion, BCI has already partnered with World Wide Technology’s Edwardsville distribution center and will begin placing individuals there and in other industries throughout Madison, St. Clair, and Monroe Counties. (Courtesy Boone Center Inc.)