

Adults with disabilities enjoy volunteer work Arc center provides variety and choice

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By Nina Wolgelenter



DANNY BOURQUE / THE TIMES-PICAYUNE
Staff member Barbara Williams, right, and Willurtra Brown work together to manicure a small garden patch at the Arc of Greater New Orleans Wolfe Center.

Every Friday, a small group of volunteers from Uptown New Orleans arrives at Second Harvest Food Bank in Harahan and gets to work sorting food. At the end of the day, nearly 500 Lagniappe Packs are ready for distribution to schoolchildren to ensure they don't go hungry over the weekend.

It doesn't take long to realize there is something special about

these volunteers. They are adults with disabilities: Down syndrome, deafness and other mental and physical challenges.

"Instead of just having them perceived as being the recipient of (help from) volunteers, we wanted, as our overall mission, to give them the opportunity to give back," said Tom Barnes, director of individual options at The Arc of Greater New Orleans.

About 130 adults with disabilities arrive at The Arc of New Orleans Wolfe Center's Uptown, Metairie and Westwego locations daily and begin activities under the guidance of support staff. Some choose leisure or recreational activities, while others like to volunteer. On any given day, these small groups of volunteers head out to work at various places, such as Longue Vue House and Gardens, T.R.E.E, The Green Project, New Orleans Metropolitan Tourism and Convention Bureau, Cystic Fibrosis Foundation, Parkway Partners, Audubon Zoo and Second Harvest.

"They are so appreciative that they have a job to do and they take it very seriously," said Tanya O'Reilly, program coordinator at Second Harvest. "They are willing to work and they get excited about doing it."

"I like to help other people," Theresa, 47, said when asked why she signed up for Second Harvest.

"Volunteering is a job," Anna, 58, said. "It gives me a purpose. I feel like if I do nothing, my heart will stop beating."

The idea of volunteering is not new at the Wolfe Center. Two decades ago, volunteer coordinator Jane Wilson began organizing groups as a means of involving adults with disabilities into the world around them.

"Volunteering gives you value," Wilson said. "We want them to have variety and choice and hopefully make volunteering a part of their life." No matter what type of disability, "if we have an adult who wants to volunteer, we will find a way to make that happen," said Valerie St. Amant, associate director of individual options. "When we work with businesses or organizations, we try to ensure that adults without disabilities will also be volunteering. This gives us an opportunity to assimilate and show that adults with disabilities are really no different than a person without disabilities."

The Arc of Greater New Orleans was formed in 1953 as a social outlet for people of all ages with disabilities, before there were any inclusive programs in the public schools. In 1972, schools were mandated by law to provide early intervention and services to school-aged students. Today, The Arc's population comprises adults 18 and older.

Part of Barnes' goal is to give them life and job skills that will ultimately lead to employment. To date, he has more than 130 members working in hotels, restaurants and landscaping businesses throughout the New Orleans area.

Businesses "should really give them a chance," O'Reilly said.

