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A place of acceptance: Camp Civitan provides Williams special needs clients a place to call their own

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After graduating from high school, most young adults go on to college or find jobs. But young adults with developmental disabilities sometimes end up just sitting at home after they finish school, according to Camp Civitan's Executive Director Dawn Trapp.

To provide a place for adults with developmental disabilities to continue learning and work toward independence, Camp Civitan created its Day Treatment and Training Program for Adults (DTA).

"Our day program integrates the clients into society, teaching about volunteerism, training for jobs, and continuing to work on daily living skills of functional reading and math, as well as healthy lifestyles, physical fitness and Special Olympic training," Trapp said. "We believe that everyone given the opportunity has the desire and ability to be a very productive community member."



From left: Mark Konkell, Guine Michelson and Carisa Stilwell work on calendar skills like naming the days of the week and holidays at Camp Civitan's Day Treatment and Training Program for Adults. Ryan Williams/WGCN

The Williams DTA program runs Monday through Friday from 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. and serves about seven adult clients. Camp Civitan also has a DTA program in Phoenix.

Marietta Helton-Lang, who used to work in the public school system, is the DTA supervisor in Williams.

In the program, Helton-Lang works with the clients on skills such as telling time, counting money and reading a calendar.

While reviewing the calendar last week, client Carisa Stilwell counted the days until Labor Day and said she was excited to ride in an ambulance for the Labor Day parade. As the clients discussed which holidays occurred each month, Mark Konkell said Thanksgiving was his favorite, because "you have turkey and you have your family together."

DTA tasks like this one vary from person to person. For example, Helton-Lang is teaching one client to tell time on a digital clock, and another how to tell time on an analog clock.

"They're all individuals, with different needs and levels and everything," she said.

Helton-Lang always asks the clients if they would like to work on any given task.

"Some days maybe they don't feel like it, and they can not do it, it's okay," she said. "We don't push them here. We really respect them as adults and we just work with them."

Attending the DTA program helps the clients gain confidence, according to Helton-Lang.

"I think they feel good about themselves," she said. "They have different things they look forward to. And they are learning their skills too. Once they have learned that, then they'll move to something different and we can work on something else. So they are gaining in their knowledge and abilities."

One of the DTA program's regular teaching activities is collecting money from Camp Civitan's candy boxes around town, which the clients do every few weeks.

"It's like a little business, because then they bring the money back, we count it, roll it, and then they're part of the process of taking it to the bank," Helton-Lang said.

One of the clients, Guine Michelson, is learning that four quarters make a dollar. After collecting the candy box money, Guine makes rows of quarters and counts how many dollars they make.

Besides the educational component of the DTA program, the clients also do exercise, make crafts, and go on field trips to places like Bearizona and the Grand Canyon while at DTA.

"We do a lot here, but it keeps them active, keeps them busy," Helton-Lang said.

Camp Civitan's Food Coordinator Janice Reese also works with the DTA clients in the kitchen about once a week. The clients help Reese make their lunch.

"We come over and we look at what we have and we kind of shop and decide, we have cheese, tortillas, olives, and enchilada sauce. What sounds good?" Reese said. "And you kind of encourage them to put something together and figure it out."

Reese has taught the clients that the first thing they do when they come in the kitchen is pull their hair back, wash their hands and put on an apron.

Some of the clients may be able to do some chopping for the meal, while others may put together a salad.

"So we use their skill level so that they feel that they're a part of that meal," Reese said. "We just really encourage with all of our programs some independence."

After the cooking, the clients help with cleanup, including sweeping, doing dishes, wiping tables, and dating and labeling food.

"Some just depending on their abilities might be on the same chore for a week just so they would get good at that chore," Reese said. "We're trying to teach them life skills."

Reese also works with the DTA clients in Camp Civitan's greenhouse. The clients help grow plants, put them in pots and decorate the pots. Then Camp Civitan's thrift store sells the plants.

"And the kids that work on those get that money into a fund so they can go do field trips and things like that," Reese said.

For Reese, the best part of her job is seeing the clients grow.

"It's so exciting to be able to be a part of helping someone learn a skill that maybe someday they'll be able to go out and use that," she said.

Beth Michelson, who works as Camp Civitan's nurse during the summer and sometimes helps with the DTA program, has seen her 22-year-old daughter Guine grow in the program.

"She's gaining a lot of independence, and she's learning how to get along not only with her peers but with other adults and being able to take direction from other adults," Michelson said.

The DTA clients are learning how to interact with others not just in the DTA classroom, but also from collecting the money from the candy boxes around town, Michelson said. One of Michelson's goals for Guine is for her to walk into the businesses where the candy boxes are located, look the worker in the eye, greet them, and explain that she is collecting the candy box money.

"Those are social skills that other parents of typical kids, they just take for granted that the kids are going to learn that and that they do that," Michelson said.

One of the other things Michelson likes about the DTA program is that the clients have opportunities to volunteer. For example, the clients help sort and lift the food at the local Food Bank.

"We're integrating the children and the young adults into the community, and the community's getting exposure that way and seeing that the kids are just very typical," said Michelson.

In the future, Michelson said she hopes the DTA clients have more possibilities to volunteer with others in the community. To Michelson, these opportunities would "(help) people to understand how easy it is to be with our kids and how positive they are. It's just a matter of understanding that even though they may be 22 or 35 or 48 or whatever age they are, developmentally, they may be (2-12), whatever they're at, and that that's the way you have to approach them. But they have so much to give."

More information about Camp Civitan's DTA program is available at (928) 635-2944, (602) 953-2944, or www.campcivitan.org.

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