

Faith & Community

Role model: Billboard makes Megan Houle the face of Lakeside Curative Services and a great representative for its programs



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Megan Houle has been the face of Lakeside Curative Services in Racine for several weeks now. Her slight smile from a billboard on State Street is meant to show passers-by exactly how the nonprofit vocational rehabilitation center can help people with disabilities.

And the 32-year-old Racine woman with Down syndrome is a perfect example. She's articulate, friendly, funny, loves her job and is fiercely independent.

At work

Maggie White, the executive director of Lakeside Curative, said she asked Houle to help her tell people about their integrated employment program several months ago. It's a long-running program that has helped many people with disabilities become more self-reliant.

"We have a holistic approach to working with people with disabilities," said White.

The integrated employment program was started 10 years ago by Racine County and Lakeside Curative, and was set up so that Lakeside's employees remained their employees, but would work at county facilities.

The program provides jobs to some of Lakeside's high-functioning clients doing janitorial work at Ridgewood Care Center and the Workforce Development Center. This, in turn, opened up spots in onsite workshop-type employment opportunities at Lakeside and other similar organizations for other disabled people, many of whom were on waiting lists.

Houle has been an employee in the program for the past five years.

“She is a good representative for all people with disabilities,” said White. “I have so much respect for her. She’s a good role model.”

A goal attained

After graduating from high school at age 21, Houle was in a program with the Racine County Opportunity Center working as an assistant to a teacher in a child care program. “I love kids, but working with kids, I don’t have the patience,” she said.

Five years ago she was also a part of an agency in Kenosha. It was her case worker there who told her there was an opening through Lakeside Curative to work in the laundry department at Ridgewood.

“They helped me find a job that I love to do,” Houle said. “I started five years ago. I fold and deliver clothes. I put them in the right rooms. I like working at Ridgewood.”

Through her job in the integrated employment program, Houle was able to reach the goal she had set for herself.

“My goal was, when I was 30, was to have my own place,” she said.

Houle now lives in her own apartment in Downtown Racine. She prepares her own breakfast each morning. She takes the bus to and from work each day, and spends her afternoons volunteering in Ridgewood’s activities department.

Each night she makes her own dinner and then prepares for the day to come by bathing and packing her lunch.

“I do that every day, Monday through Friday,” Houle said.

Opportunities for independence

White said Houle is truly independent. She doesn’t live in an apartment building for people with disabilities.

Houle does receive a lot of support and help from her parents, she said. Her mom helps her with shopping, and her dad helps her with her bills and budget.

“I have a great family,” she said.

But Houle loves the independence her job affords her. “If I wasn’t working, I would lose my apartment,” she said.

People with disabilities really value their jobs, White said. They are typically very hard workers, on time and great employees.

Lakeside Curative currently has 54 people working in the integrated employment program at Ridgewood and the Workforce Development Center. Twenty-five of them are disabled.

Lakeside Curative, 2503 Lincolnwood Court, also offers a facility-based work service program where about 100 disabled employees work five days a week, earn a paycheck and learn important vocational,

life and social skills. They also have a day service program that allows people with disabilities to learn work and social skills. That program has more than 20 participants.

“We want to remind everyone why we’re doing this,” White said. “To help people like Megan grow, develop and become independent.”

The Lakeside Curative billboard on State Street, just east of Marquette Street, that features Houle’s photo is the second of three such advertisements that will be displayed in the city. Houle said it feels wonderful to be a part of the campaign.

“They help people with a disability to get jobs,” she said of Lakeside. “They are my friends. They are a gift from God.”

As for others with disabilities, Houle, in true role model fashion, gave this advice: “Believe in yourself. You can do anything you want if you put your mind to it.”

How to help

For more information on Lakeside Curative Services, their programs or how to help them with their mission, call (262) 598-0098 or visit their Web site at <http://www.lakesidecurative.com>

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