advance
Newsletter of Advancing Opportunities
MARCH 2014

Adults' Night Out Activities

Cooking Up Some Fun

"Cooking is at once child's play and adult joy. And cooking done with care is an act of love," observed top chef Craig Claiborne.

Once a month, **Jen Palmer**, Adults' Night Out (ANO) and Parents' Night Out (PNO) Coordinator in the northwestern region invites families to join a cooking class, where everyone helps make a meal and gets to enjoy it afterward.

Making this event even more enjoyable, each class celebrates a seasonal holiday and culture, along with the simple joys of a particular food.

For the March class, Jen and two staff members, **Valerie Lee** and **Kim Tacket**, were joined by a group of six teens and young adults. Most of them have been coming regularly, a sure sign of the program's success and popularity. Teaching the cooking class is **Karen Maxon**, a culinary vocational instructor at The Rose House, a nonprofit agency that provides programs and services to adults with cognitive disabilities.

PEELING A ND PREP – *Jen Palmer helps MaryRita Tortorello clean up a carrot for the shepherd's pie dish the group prepared.* Photo by Daniel Berek

"This time," said Jen, "the group has been hoping to make something for March." Karen got the group involved by asking what special holiday comes in March. Most of the group answered, "St. Patrick's Day," and Karen talked about shepherd's pie, emphasizing its Irish origin as an end-of-the-week dish using remaining vegetables, meat, and potatoes, the last being an especially common food in Ireland. Karen asked the group, "Should we dye our food green?" The question was met with amused surprise. "Great idea; I'm glad you asked that!" said **Ryan Shaw**. "Can we do that?" Karen said she would let the group decide.

However, before the group could begin with the food preparation, the individuals had to be prepared themselves. Karen had the group go over what everyone needed to do to prepare their work stations.

Participants **Alesandro Corva**, **Eric Vaccaro**, and **Jean Nolan** reviewed safety and food-handling precautions, including the correct way of handling and using a knife and

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A Word of Thanks

We Could Not Do It Without Your Support

Dear Friends,

I think it is fair to say, after delivering services to people with disabilities for 64 years, Advancing Opportunities has stood the test of time. Over the years, the agency has changed its name. The organizations has grown; our staff has tripled in size within the past two years. We have opened offices in new locations and added to the types of supports we offer.

The one constant throughout our history is our dedication to our mission. We have kept a laser-like focus on helping people with disabilities live as independently as possible in communities of their choosing.

Whether it is MaryRita, who is learning to cook; Mary Jo, who will be able to exercise her right to vote without requiring assistance from anyone; or Melissa, who will live in her very own home in Harmony Township – our services are about the individual. These are just three examples of how Advancing Opportunities has succeeded in its mission. We provide our services to hundreds of children and adults with disabilities and their families each year.

We could not do it without you. Your support, in so many different ways, has helped us make an impact on so many different lives. Thank you for sharing our mission and making a positive difference for people with all types of disabilities.

Sincerely,

Jack Mudge
Chief Executive Officer
Advancing Opportunities

Staff Recognized With Awards From Peers

On Thursday, January 9, 2014, Advancing Opportunities held an Employee Recognition Luncheon for full time employees of the agency. Peer-nominated awards were presented to the following employees:

New Employee Awards are presented to individuals who have been working for the agency for less than one year. The New Employee Team Spirit Award was presented to Employment Specialist **Darlene Arnold**, and the New Employee Professional Service Award was presented to Employment Specialist **Karl Craft**.

The Team Spirit Award was given to Residential Support Specialist **Sonya Wilson**, and the Professional Service Award was awarded to Family Support Coordinator **Monique Calixte**. The Foothold Super User Award was given to Advocate **Justin Allsopp**. The Cross Selling Award was presented to Behaviorist **Sue Rodriguez**. The Bright Idea Award was given to Executive Assistant and Development Specialist **Briana Walsh**.

The Heart and Soul Award was presented to Administrative Assistant **Harlie Abrams** for her work supporting Employment Services, Residential Services, and Prevention Education. The Executive Director's Award was given to Employee #2, **Sheryl Smith** for outstanding service to the agency.

Advancing Opportunities
All Disabilities Many Services One Agency

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Advancing Opportunities/Cerebral Palsy of New Jersey helps children and adults with all types of disabilities gain independence. We believe people with disabilities have the right to participate fully in society. Since 1950, we have provided services, support, education and advocacy to individuals with disabilities and their families to help them lead fullr lives at home, school, work and play.

Enhancing the Democratic Process

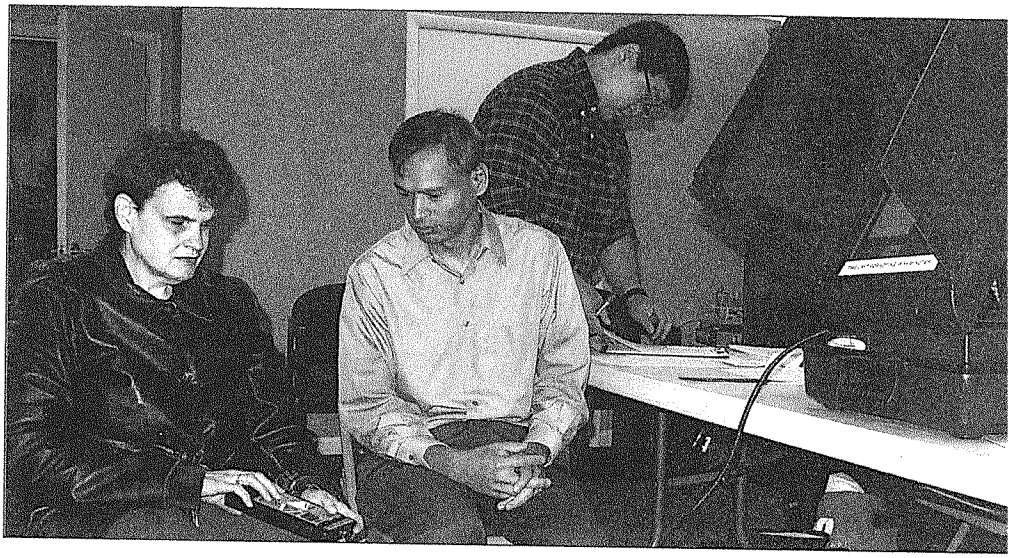
Accessible Voting Machines Evaluated

Last fall, members of the Assistive Technology Services Department joined forces with researchers from Clemson University in a project designed to increase the accessibility of voting machines.

Department director **Fred Tchang** and Technology Lending Center Coordinator **David Lam** visited several independent living center locations around the state and had volunteers put an accessible voting machine to the test.

"We are having people try and then comment on an accessible voting system that is already in use," said Fred. "These trials are being held to influence the design and accessibility of future voting machines," he said. Men and women with a variety of physical impairments were recruited to try the machine and then answer a series of questions based on their experience.

The accessible voting machine they tested features a display panel that lists in the information in large type. A screen reader is available to provide the information audibly through headphones. A hand-held controller with large differently shaped buttons and Braille markings lets voters scroll through their choices and cast a vote by pressing a button.



ACCESS FOR ALL *-- Mary Jo Partyka (left), who is visually impaired, tests an accessible voting machine in the Community Room at Project Freedom in Hamilton, NJ. Fred Tchang, director of Advancing Opportunities' Assistive Technology Services department, collected data on the process and recorded Ms. Partyka's recommendations for improvements to the system.*

At Project Freedom in Hamilton, NJ, **Michael Powell** and **Mary Jo Partyka** participated in a trial. Powell, who uses a wheelchair, said he prefers going to a polling place on Election Day rather than submitting an absentee ballot. "When I lived in Paterson, I used to need friends to take me to vote because the school wasn't accessible at all. They would have to carry me up the stairs and someone would have to get in the booth with me to reach the levers. This," he said gesturing to the accessible voting machine, "is like a dream come true."

Ms. Partyka, who is blind said, "Until they had these machines, I would have to have my parents or a friend come with me to help me vote."

Accessible voting machines help ensure all eligible voters are able to vote independently and privately. Current laws require voting districts to have accessible voting machines for people with disabilities. Many districts maintain two different types of machines.

Future voting machines will be influenced by universal design, meaning everyone will find them easy to use – including people with all different types of disabilities.

Dr. Juan Gilbert, a professor and chairman of the Human-Centered Computing Division of Clemson's School of Computing, is directing the three-year research and training initiative. Funding for the $4.5 million study comes from the Election Assistance Commission.

About the Funder:

Established by the Help America Vote Act of 2002, the Election Assistance Commission is an independent, bipartisan commission charged with helping states meet requirements of federal voting law. It sets guidelines, serves as a national clearinghouse of information on election administration, accredits testing laboratories and certifies voting systems.

Welcome to the Neighborhood

Group Home Established in Harmony Twp.

Over 70 neighbors, friends, and project partners attended an Open House to help Advancing Opportunities celebrate the creation of a group home for women with disabilities in Harmony Township last October.

"This Open House celebrates a woman's dream and the endless possibilities that exist when a family has a vision and perseveres until it comes true," said **Jack Mudge**, Chief Executive Office of Advancing Opportunities.

The story of how the residence, nestled on the side of a hill with majestic views all around, went from being just a house to a group home began in October of 2009, when one of its future residents, **Melissa Gentle**, saw the house for sale and told her parents it was where she wanted to live; she wanted it as her group home.

Over the next four years, her parents, **Frank** and **Susan Gentle**, worked hard to make it happen. They cast a wide net for support and found many partners along the way.

At a Real Life Choices Conference hosted by the New Jersey Division of Developmental Disabilities (DDD), the Gentles attended a workshop chaired by **Ed Murphy** and **Krystal Odell** and received the inspiration they needed to get started. When the Council on Affordable Housing Committee in Harmony was forming, Frank and Sue volunteered and they became regulars at Supportive Housing Association of New Jersey meetings as well.

The Gentle family shared information about the Special Needs Housing Partnership with members of the Harmony Township Committee and Mayor **Brian Tipton**. Their rural municipality dug deep and found funding to help support the project.

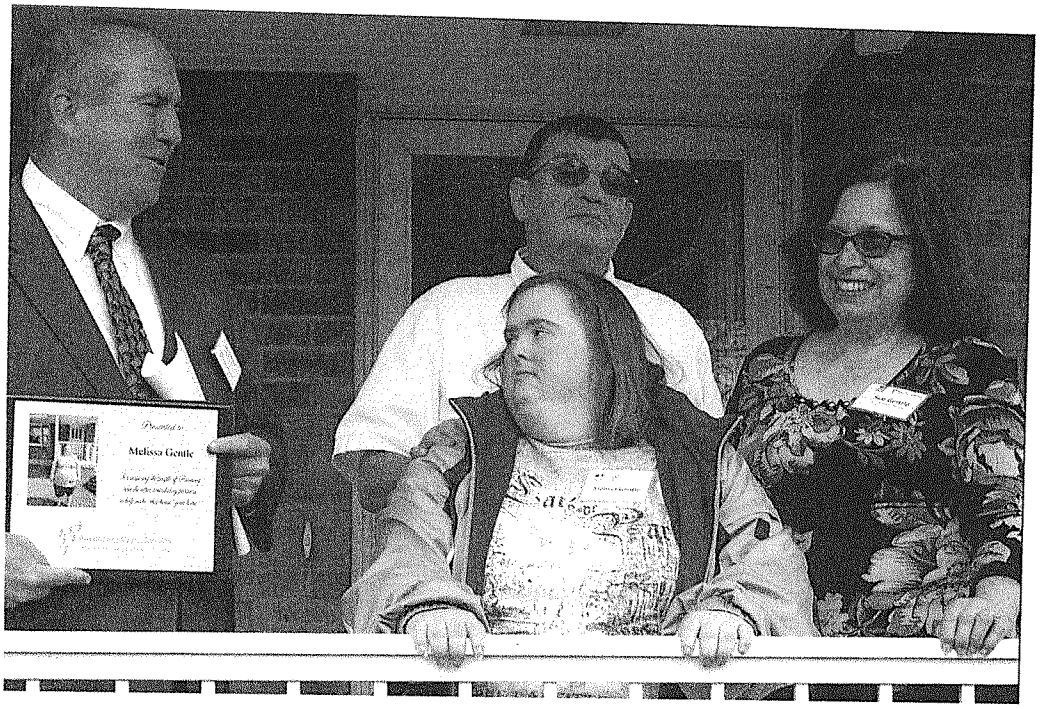
The Gentle family reached out to and worked with the NJ Division of Developmental Disabilities, the NJ Department of Community Affairs, and the NJ Housing and Finance Agency.

Susan and Frank worked with developer **Krystal Odell** of Pennrose, architect **Kyle Van Dyke**, **Tom Toronto** of Bergen County's United Way, and Advancing Opportunities to ensure all the pieces in a complex puzzle fell into exactly the right places. It took more than three years, but they knitted together a plan to make the beautiful four-bedroom ranch in Harmony a home for their daughter and three other women.

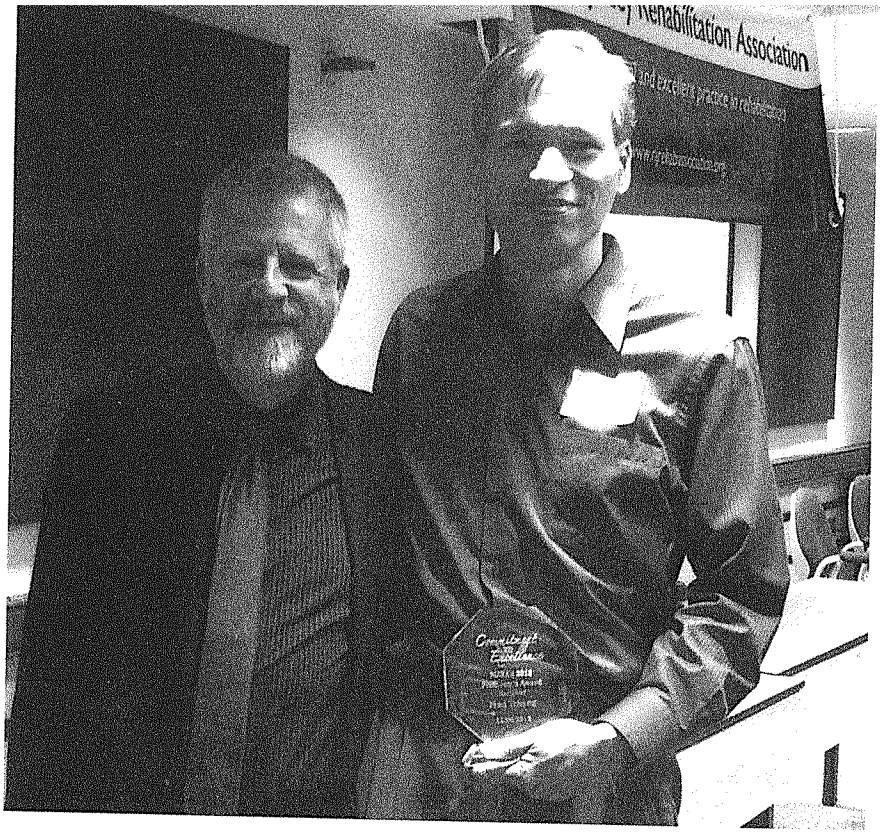
Janel Winter, the NJ Division of Disabilities' Director of Housing, was on hand at the Open House. She noted the many different partners involved in the project and said, "When we talk about community integration, this is exactly what we're talking about."

Susan, Frank and Melissa attended the open house and spent most of the afternoon thanking the many neighbors and friends who helped make project a reality. "There are no *theys* in this community," said Frank, "only we."

"Our agency is pleased to be of the partners in Melissa's vision for her future," said Mudge. "We will provide supports to Melissa and her new friends so they can live happily and safely in this home. We look forward to helping them be active participants in this welcoming and wonderful community. We hope they have the best lives ever," he said.



SPECIAL PRESENTATION *– Advancing Opportunities CEO Jack Mudge (left) presents a plaque to the Gentle family during an Open House at the group home in Harmony Township, NJ. Parents, Frank and Susan Gentle, were a driving force in the process that brought together resources and support for the home, which is where their daughter, Melissa, (front) will reside.*



PRESIDENT'S AWARD – *Greg Makely (left), President of the New Jersey Rehabilitation Association, presents Fred Tchang with the President's Award for his contributions and leadership in assistive technology.*

President's Award
NJRA Honors Tchang

Fred Tchang, Director of Assistive Technology Services at Advancing Opportunities, received the New Jersey Rehabilitation Association's President's Award during its 2013 Annual Professional Development Conference held in December.

The award was presented by Association President **Greg Makely**, who noted that Fred and his team at Advancing Opportunities help level the playing field for children in school, and men and women in the workplace by introducing assistive technology – from the most basic hardware to the most sophisticated technology available.

"It is Fred's intelligent approach to assistive technology needs for people with disabilities that has built a groundbreaking program that makes it possible for many to access work and succeed in career building enterprises," said Makely.

"Fred understands the value of team approach and learning from fellow professionals," continued Makely.

He noted Tchang is a member of the New Jersey Coalition for the Advancement of Rehabilitation Technology and the New Jersey Coalition of Inclusive Education and that he currently serves as vice chair of the Rehabilitation Engineering and Assistive Technology Society of North America's Professional Standards Board, which provided oversight of the Assistive Technology Professional credentialing.

Upcoming Events:

Dance the Night Away and Raise Funds and Awareness

Spring Gala

We hope you'll join us for the **Spring Gala** on Saturday, April 26, 2014 at 6 p.m. at Greenacres Country Club for dinner and dancing. For more information about tickets or sponsorship, contact Development Officer Liz Graham at 609-882-4182 or via email at lgraham@advopps.org

Great Golf for a Great Cause x 2

Friends and Supporters have two chances to join us on the golf course this year! The annual **Golf Classic at Deerwood Country Club** in Westampton, NJ will be held on Monday, June 16, 2014. Participants enjoy 18 holes of golf, lunch, cocktails, dinner, prizes and awards. The fee is $600 for a foursome and $150 for individuals. Tickets and sponsorship opportunities are still available; please contact Development Officer Liz Graham at 609-882-4182 or via email at lgraham@advopps.org for more information.

The **Rothwell Family Golf Classic**, a Mercer County favorite, will be held on Monday, September 22, 2014 at Cherry Valley Country Club in Skillman, NJ. If you'd like to help plan this event, contact Liz!

2014 New York Metro Abilities Expo

Advancing Opportunities is once again pleased to be sponsoring the New York Metro Abilities Expo, Friday, May 2 through Sunday, May 4, 2014 at the New Jersey Convention Center in Edison, NJ. The Assistive Technology Services team will be hosting the Assistive Technology Showcase, with all of the latest tools and devices for computer access, reading and writing and more. Stop by and say hello. The Expo is free to attend; registering online beforehand ensures speedy entry: http://www.abilitiesexpo.com/newyork/index.html

Respite & Recreation Provided for Families

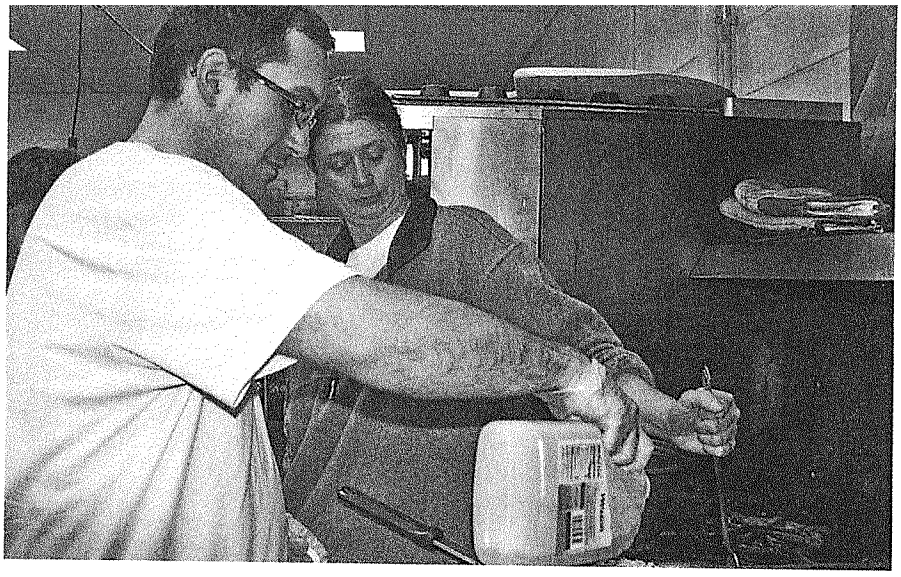
Jen Palmer, Coordinator of Adults' Night Out and Parents' Night Out programs has been reaching out to adults and children with disabilities in the northwestern New Jersey counties of Morris, Sussex, and Warren. "We want to provide a variety of stimulating activities," says Jen. "I ask the participants what they want; it's an evolving program."

Adults' Night Out provides social and recreational outlets for adults and older teens with disabilities. Participants see movies, go to plays and concerts, experience cultural activities at museums and ethnic festivals, enjoy outdoor recreation, participate in music and dance, engage in bowling, and learn culinary skills. Many of the activities involve sharing lunch or dinner, allowing participants to socialize with one another and make new friends.

"Sometimes, we are an audience; sometimes, we are active participants," says Jen. "We want to do heaithy activities, along with traditional things such socializing with each other and interacting with other people in the community."

Parents' Night Out serves two purposes: First, parents of children and teens with disabilities have a much-needed respite, to help them have time to themselves which, in turn, will help them face the challenges of meeting their children's needs later on. Second, children have an excellent opportunity to engage with peers in a variety of fun, social, and educational activities, such as arts and crafts, games, Karaoke, yoga, and cooking.

"We want the programs to be enjoyable and educational activities that mix socializing and doing things together," says Jen. Some events , see children and youth going to movies, plays, restaurants, cultural festivals, and bowling. "We teach good community manners and skills when we are out in the community," she said.



STIR IT UP -- *Eric Vacarro adds oil to the pan under the watchful eye of Karen Maxon, a culinary vocational instructor at The Rose House.* *Photo by Daniel Berek*

Cooking Up Some Fun

FROM PAGE 1

avoiding cross-contamination of meat and other foods -- these are extremely important themes throughout every cooking event. Chopping and peeling the potatoes and other vegetables involved a great deal of teamwork and coordination among Karen, the staff, and the participants themselves.

After the vegetables were ready for cooking, it was time to assemble at the stove. Some participants helped with the boiling the potatoes and carrots, while others assisted with sautéing the onions, celery, mixed vegetables and, eventually, the ground turkey. When the potatoes were boiled, it was time for a very important step. "Who wants to be a taste tester?" Karen asked. Several participants stepped forward. "Do the potatoes need anything else?" One participant suggested pepper, which Karen duly added; a new taste test approved the added condiment.

There was one more addition: the green food dye. Karen added a little at a time, until the group reached consensus that the mashed potatoes were the correct shade of Kelly green. As for the sautéed meat, everyone sampled it and agreed that it was just right. Karen assembled the ingredients in two foil pans. "All of our food is made with love," she added.

Dessert consisted of two apple pies. "Do we need parchment paper? asked Eric. "It would be a good idea," replied Karen, "if the pie shells were directly on the cookie sheet." "Awesomeness!" exclaimed Ryan, at which **MaryRita Tortorello** broke out into laughter. With dinner and dessert in the oven, it was time for a brief break.

Karen entertained the entire group by retelling a recent episode of Worst Cooks in America. "A man used peanut M&Ms and guess what he mixed them with? Pasta sauce!" "Oh, you mean peanut sauce," said Eric. "The judges wouldn't even taste it," Karen added.

In preparing for the meal, the participants practiced setting the tables correctly; silk flowers are optional. It was then time to cap off an enjoyable evening with dinner and dessert, albeit without the multicolored chocolate and peanut treats.

Supporting People with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities

Training Series Addresses Grief, Loss and Aging

Loss is an inevitable part of life -- whether it is a loved one or a home, a job or a pet. With loss comes grief, which can manifest itself in a wide range of feelings, behaviors, and even symptoms. People with intellectual and developmental disabilities are not immune to loss or feelings of grief.

Advancing Opportunities' Director of Employment Services **Margaret Gilbride, JD, CT**, will be presenting the one-day workshop, "Grief and Loss: Supporting Adults with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities Navigate Their Loss Journeys," at Advancing Opportunities' Ewing, NJ location on Wednesday, May 14, 2014.

The training is designed to help caregivers, family members and direct support professionals recognize the things that may trigger feelings of loss in people with developmental disabilities -- things like outliving family and friends, staff turnover or changes in a living situation. Ms. Gilbride, a certified death educator who has worked in the disability field for nearly 25 years, will share concrete, appropriate ways to acknowledge and explain a loss and ways to support the individual through the ongoing challenge of living after the loss.

Ms. Gilbride will also be presenting "People with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities Growing Old: Understanding and Supporting Age-Related Health Changes and End of Life Care," at the Boggs Center for Developmental Disabilities in New Brunswick, NJ on April 15, 2014 and in Ewing, NJ on June 25, 2014.

This one-day workshop covers the similarities and differences in the aging process between the general population and those living with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Participants will examine the physiological, psychological, social and spiritual dimensions of aging as they impact direct service provision. Practical suggestions for addressing and supporting individuals through aging and the end of life will be shared.

Both programs are presented through the Boggs Center on Developmental Disabilities. They are free for employees of DDD, staff of agencies funded by DDD, DDD-Qualified Providers, as well as individuals with disabilities and family members. For all other registrants the cost of the workshop is $75. Registration is required; you can visit http://rwjms.rutgers.edu/boggscenter/ or call (732) 235-9307.

***NAVIGATING JOURNEYS OF LOSS AND AGING** -- Employment Services Director Margaret Gilbride is conducting trainings through the Boggs Center to provide direct support professionals with the knowledge and skills needed to help people with intellectual and developmental disabilities through experiences of loss and grief or aging.*

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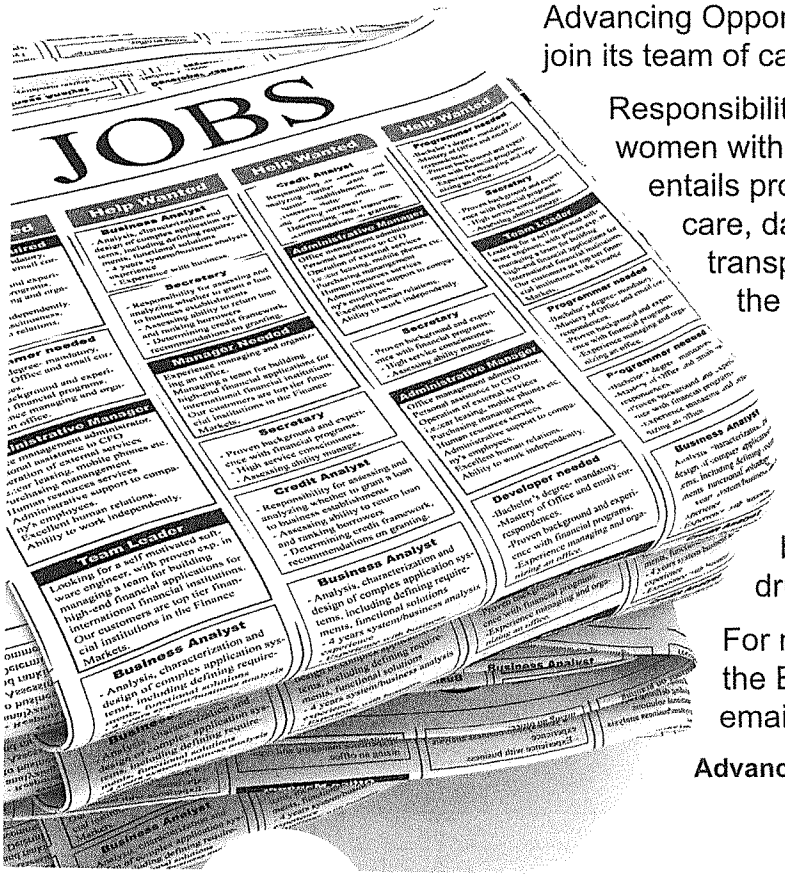
All Disabilities. Many Services. One Agency.

Advancing Opportunities Is Hiring!



Advancing Opportunities is looking for compassionate individuals to join its team of caring, well-trained direct support professionals.

Responsibilities include providing direct services to men and women with disabilities in residential support programs. This entails providing supervision and/or assistance with personal care, daily living activities, recreational pursuits, transportation, medical appointments, or any other needs the individuals served by the program may have.

Candidates should have one year of related experience working with people with disabilities. Must have valid driver's license and be at least 18 years of age. As a condition of employment, applicants will be screened for criminal background history and are required to submit to drug testing. Paid training is provided.

For more information visit www.advopps.org and click on the Employment link. Fax resumes to 609-882-4054 or email them to info@advopps.org.

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