

Five Years After Its Launch, Alameda County Project SEARCH Reaching New Levels of Success

Alameda County's groundbreaking Project SEARCH program recently completed its fifth year of providing year-long internships – and new career opportunities – to individuals with autism and other developmental disabilities. That milestone is celebrated on January 28 when the County marks the graduation of its latest group of interns, 12 very determined individuals who have lifted the County workforce with their professionalism and brought new perspectives to the office that underscore the value of diversity in the workplace. When Alameda County's Diversity Programs Unit (DPU) launched its Project SEARCH program in 2009, leadership and front-line employees felt an immediate jolt of pride at being part of a County team so committed to the tenets of



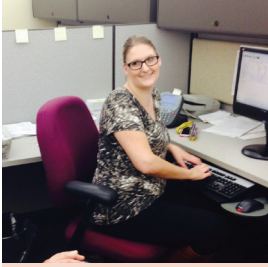
diversity and inclusion. But over time, County departments far and wide have bought into the program for more practical reasons – because it's giving Alameda County an edge by tapping into a pool of talented and dedicated workers that historically has been overlooked. “The benefits that our Project SEARCH interns receive in terms of career advancement are equaled if not surpassed by the benefits to the County,” said Alameda County Administrator Susan S. Muranishi, a driving force behind the program. “Every year we get a new group of interns who come in here and set a positive example for the rest of us in terms of professionalism and ‘can-do’ attitude.” Project SEARCH began in 1996 at Cincinnati's Children's Hospital and has since become a national program cham-

pioning work opportunities for individuals with disabilities. Alameda County launched the first public sector Project SEARCH program in California, and it is one of the employment pipeline projects that aims to ensure the County workforce reflects the entire community. Five years since the program's launch, figures show that Alameda County Project SEARCH is having a profound impact in providing participants a leg up in their pursuit of productive, rewarding careers. Through 2014, over 80 percent of Alameda County Project SEARCH graduates have transitioned to paid employment, said Lori Kotsonas, Director of Supported Employment Services with East Bay Innovations (EBI), the San Leandro-based nonprofit that partners with the County and Oakland Unified Adult Education to provide Project SEARCH. Thanks to Alameda County Project SEARCH, and a similar partnership EBI has formed with Children's Hospital Oakland, the nonprofit has seen a dramatic shift in the types of jobs obtained by the people it supports. Prior to the launch of Project SEARCH in Alameda County, 77 percent of the people supported in employment by EBI worked in jobs in the retail and grocery industry. Now that number is down to 12 percent, with the remainder transitioning to new kinds of jobs that tend to pay better and require a wider range of skills - in the public sector, in health care or in office jobs in general. “Thanks to Project SEARCH in Alameda County, we've increased the variety, stability, wages and benefits, and employment opportunities for individuals with developmental disabilities,” Kotsonas said.

The following four pages contain some short profiles of the latest Alameda County Project SEARCH graduates. Potential employers – and anyone else interested in learning more about Project SEARCH, should call Lori Kotsonas at (510) 618-1580 ext.15 or go to eastbayinnovations.org. For those interested in participating in the Alameda County Project SEARCH program, contact Alameda County's Diversity Programs Unit at (510) 272-3895, or visit <http://www.acgov.org/cao/diversity>.

Lauren

Lauren has brought her bright optimism and inexhaustible energy to three different County offices over the past year. She spent four months as a file clerk in the Sheriff's Office's Civil Unit and then proved to be an invaluable resource within the buzzing General Services Agency (GSA) parking operation in the basement of the County Administration Building in Oakland. Lately, she's been spending most of her time behind a computer in the Clerk-Recorder's Office, processing delinquent fee notification forms and other County records. "I worked for three years as a bagger and a checker at Safeway," she said. "That was a good job, but I knew I didn't want to do that forever." Lauren knew she wanted her next professional step to be an office job where she could indulge her interest in computers. Her year-long internship through Alameda County Project SEARCH has really fit the bill, especially her rotation with the Clerk-Recorder, where her work station seems always to be abuzz with activity. "When I first came to the County I was pretty nervous," she says. "But everybody's been so helpful and I've grown more comfortable and confident. The best thing about this is getting the chance to prove myself and getting more and more responsibility over time. I feel like things are moving in the right direction, toward the career I want to have."



Joseph

Joseph spent several months this year proving his mettle as a file clerk – scanning, organizing and filing scores of documents for several County departments. As his confidence has grown, and his supervisors have watched his progress, new opportunities are coming his way. "It's all about being busy," Joseph says with the plain-spoken sincerity for which he is known. "I like filing, scanning and indexing, but I think I like working on the computer the best." Joseph's supervisors in GSA say his versatility and "can-do" attitude has been invaluable, due to the need to throw a wide range of projects his way. Lately, the department has been delving deep into old personnel files – some dating back to the 1980s – in an exhaustive effort to convert reams of yellowing paper into clean, digital records. "I've learned a lot of new stuff," Joseph says. "There are a lot of different documents up here that we have to organize. I know the system pretty well, but every once in a while I have to ask someone about a document I've never seen before." Joseph came to Project SEARCH after experiencing success in two previous jobs – most of it "assembly-line work" such as making calendars and labeling cards. "Here I have the chance to take on big projects all on my own," he said. "When I think about what my next job will be, I hope it's a lot like this one."



Connor

When Connor arrived for his assignment with the Sheriff's Office's Payroll Division last fall, his new supervisors were embarking on a massive project to re-organize a mountain of personnel records and invoices dating back decades. Connor immediately offered a helping hand. Before long, his focus, determination and meticulous approach to organizing these files prompted the rest of the staff to back away and let him take over. "He really took the bull by the horns on that project," said his supervisor, Kathryn Martins. He's long since moved onto other projects – and whenever there's a gap of free time, his colleagues know he's the first one to offer a helping hand on whatever else needs to be done. "I've always been interested in law enforcement," Connor said. "It's really exciting to have the opportunity to work here." It's not like Connor is unfamiliar with professional life. He held jobs in high school and in college – positions that included clerking at a title company and working as a barista at Starbucks. But like many of his colleagues in Project SEARCH, Connor always wondered what it would be like to have an office job. His internship with Alameda County offered just the chance – and it hasn't disappointed. "If I could pick any job in the future, I think it would be doing just what I'm doing now."



Mat

“Step into my office,” Mat says to a visitor who has arrived at his cubicle on a Tuesday morning. It’s a bright and inviting place tucked deep in the recesses of the ALCOPARK garage in Oakland. It is also a happy place for Mat, who has won over a team of admirers in the GSA Parking Division for bringing enthusiasm to his daily tasks of scanning, organizing and filing documents, mixed in with a fair amount of meticulous data entry on his computer. The high level of energy he displays at 10 in the morning is a marvel to group of bleary-eyed co-workers who still appear to be easing into their day. But Mat explains that he’s already accomplished a lot by the time he reaches the office at 8:30 a.m. He’s made breakfast, walked his dog, hitched a bus ride to BART and rode the train into work. Mat says he’s really enjoyed his year in Project SEARCH, which has helped him to “meet the outside world and polish my skills.” “I’m hoping that this will lead to an even cooler job that helps to pay the bills,” he said.



Dana

The Alameda County Sheriff’s Office’s Civil Unit is a small pocket of high-energy activity on the first floor of the Rene C. Davidson Courthouse in Oakland – a bustling hub of multi-tasking that Dana says is the ideal kind of workplace for her to spend her days. Turning away from an ominously high stack of files that has just appeared on her desk, Dana offers a bright smile: “I enjoy everything I’m doing down here. I guess the best part is the variety of jobs they have me doing.” With confidence and efficiency, she organizes all the files and returns them to their cabinets in precise numerical order – all while entertaining a pair of visitors to her work space. She’s happy to answer any and all questions - even while one co-worker has dropped by to ask if she can perform a much-needed file-scanning job, while another colleague has called on her to quickly fetch a file for a customer waiting at the service window. “I like helping out with all the different tasks because it makes me feel like an important part of the team,” she said. “At first I needed some repetition to learn all these jobs, but now that I’ve learned them I think I’m doing pretty good.”



Jessica

They say a positive attitude in the work place can be infectious. That explains why the joy and enthusiasm Jessica brings to the office each day prompts a smile and a warm greeting from everyone who crosses her path. “I really like it here,” she says while seated at her desk in the Human Resources Division of the District Attorney’s Office. “This is my first job and I’m really happy with how it’s worked out.” That’s not to say that the job is easy. Jessica’s success in the office means she’s gradually built a large number of daily responsibilities for the dynamic District Attorney’s Office and its more than 200 employees. “Sometimes the work just piles up and there’s no break,” she says. “But the fact that I have so much responsibility means I must be doing a good job. It feels really good to meet the challenge. When I came here, I had no idea I was capable to doing all these things.” What’s next for Jessica? “If I could have any job in the future, I would have a job exactly like the one I have here.”



Piotr

Alameda County has seen great success in its drive to bring local government up to speed in the Digital Age. But behind the successes of modernizing operations is a lot of leg work performed by employees who are bringing Alameda County into the 21st Century one step at a time. Just ask Piotr. In a corner of the County's



modern Clerk-Recorder's Office in Oakland, Piotr operates on the cutting edge of the County's ongoing effort to digitize all paper records. With remarkable patience, Piotr spends many of his days indexing records dating back to the County's inception in the mid-19th Century. It's a meticulous job that tests every ounce of a person's patience – and it is an essential step in converting mountains of yellowing paper and gray spools of microfiche into gleaming digital files that can be accessed with the stroke of a computer key. One recent day, he was feeding microfiche into a reading machine and copying down file numbers – one by one – to prepare the records for conversion to computer files. “This is a good job for me because it's physical,” Piotr says. “I really like to use my hands.” Piotr says his internship with Project SEARCH has allowed him to learn a wide range of office tasks, while at the same time allowing him to use the manual skills he's developed in previous jobs in retail, detailing cars and working on the back lot of car dealership.

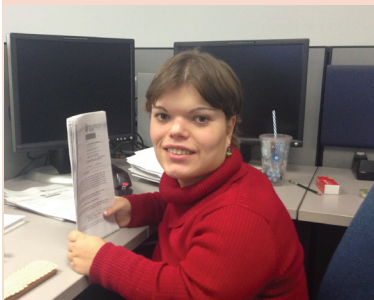
Becky

Sometimes there seems to be no end to the work that piles up on Becky's desk. Becky opens and sorts mountains of mail each morning, then follows that job by spending afternoons filing tax bills for the Alameda County Tax Collector's Office in Oakland. The paperwork keeps coming until quitting time each day – and that's just the way Becky likes it. “I really like working in an office,” she says with an ever-present smile. “The people here are really nice and they always help me when I have questions.” Her position with the Tax-Collector is the third she's had during her year-long Project SEARCH internship, following stints with the County Administrator and in the Clerk-Recorder's Mail Room. Each position has held its own set of challenges, but they also have resulted in her feeling a proud sense of accomplishment. “It takes a little while to get to know how to do these jobs,” she says. “But once I understand what to do it's not too difficult. And I can get a lot done each day.”



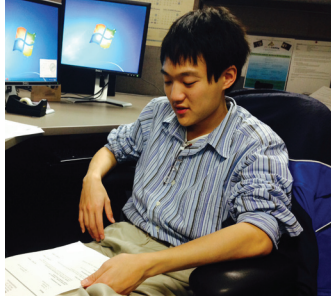
Dasha

Paper flows in torrents through the Alameda County Assessor's Office each day. Thank goodness the County has people like Dasha to keep the seemingly endless stream of deeds, change of ownership forms and other property records in order. Dasha is a seasoned veteran of the County's Project SEARCH program, having served stints with the District Attorney, Central Collections, Sheriff's Office and County Administrator. The job Dasha has liked most is with the Assessor, where she spends most of her time seated in a quiet corner cubicle – organizing property records by numerical order, stapling them together, preparing them to be filed away. “I'm good at this job because I like doing the same thing over and over,” she said. “I like it way better in the back of the office where it's quiet instead of at the front window where people ask you lots of confusing questions.” Dasha came to Project SEARCH with a wide range of experience in the retail industry, having worked at stores such as Cost Plus and Target. “In the stores there's lot of noise and distractions,” she said. “In an office it's much easier for me to stay focused.”



Austin

It's not like Austin is new to the workaday world. Though he's only 23, Austin has held a variety of jobs over the years – and he's learned to take pride in his resolute work ethic, tackling projects quickly and always displaying a sense of humor. But the idea of moving to an office job always held his fascination – even though the opportunities for this kind of work seemed few and far between, said Austin, whose last job was sweeping floors and doing dishes at a popular pizza joint.



Then along came Alameda County Project SEARCH, which opened doors for Austin to spend a year in an office setting. He says the opportunity has allowed him to flourish. “It's really helped me to grow up,” said Austin, whose voice still carries the honeyed lilt of his native Tennessee. “Here I feel part of a team and that feels really good.” Austin spent the first several months of 2014 working for the Clerk-Recorder's Office, devoting the lion's share of his time to scanning and organizing important documents. For the past several months he has worked in the County Administrator's Office – organizing, filing, scanning and dealing with

the mountains of mail that arrive at the office each day. “There's always a new challenge and that's what I like about working for the County,” he said. “When I envision my future I see myself doing a job just like this one. That would be great.”

Lend

Lend says he likes the variety of the jobs he's had in his Project SEARCH internship, but that he feels most comfortable with his current position working in the File Room in the Sheriff's Office's Payroll Division.

Lend says he likes working on computers, but finds that his eyes hurt after spending too much time in front of the screen. He prefers the softer light of the File Room, where he spends most of his days organizing personnel files and placing them into or retrieving them from the wall of cabinets that line his workspace. “It can be a pretty difficult job sometimes because when there's a file missing I have to figure out where it is and go find it,” he said. Over the past few months, Lend says he feels like he's become part of the team in the Payroll Office.

“I'm pretty independent and do pretty well working by myself,” he says. “But sometimes I have to ask for help and the people in this office are really nice about it.” The best part about Project SEARCH, he says, is that it has helped him figure out the kind of job he would like to have in the future. “I need a job because it's my income source,” he said. “But when you have to go to work every day it's important that you have a job that you like.”



Debonaire

Debonaire says he has a lot of great memories of his year in Alameda County's Project SEARCH internship program. There's also a memory that's not so great – of the day last spring when he learned of his primary task for the GSA Payroll Division.

“They had just put new carpeting in the office,” Debonaire says. “So they had boxes and boxes of files that were no longer in order. They told me they needed me to organize them.” In a matter of weeks, Debonaire completed the job and won legions of admirers in GSA. These days he's making friends in the Public Defender's Office, where he brings his easy-going attitude and determined work ethic to daily tasks that include scanning, compiling and organizing voluminous legal files. The job appeals to his penchant for organization – and led to the revelation that he enjoys being a valuable member of a team. It also leaves room for more creative endeavors when the day is done.

Debonaire is a dedicated artist who devotes much of his time away from the office drawing portraits. One of his favorite pieces was a portrait of Barack and Michelle Obama that he completed recently. “I think one day I would like to work in a museum,” Debonaire says. “That's my dream job.”

