



Providing support and information for families of children with disabilities, chronic illness and other special health care needs

A Perfect Fit: Hard Work and Great Attitude Earn Awards for Austin Man & Hotel

Linda & Steve Levine, TxP2P Volunteers

What do you get when combine a highly motivated young man and a company that sees his abilities - not his disabilities?

This October, the combination led to Employee of the Year and Large Employer of the Year honors from the Austin Mayor's Committee for People with Disabilities. The headline in a local newspaper read, "Local man is proof there isn't anything that is impossible."

Nathan Levine, who received the Employee of the Year award, is an 18-year-old young man with autism. He does not speak and cannot read. He has limited understanding of the spoken word. Often, his most effective form of communication is his behavior. He is nervous and anxious in new or confusing environments, especially noisy ones. Nathan is not exactly a perfect job candidate. And Nathan wasn't looking for a make-work job. He would have a job coach to help him, but Nathan was looking for real, productive employment.

When Nathan and his family approached the Hilton Austin about such a position, they received a four-word commitment: "We'll make it work," said Bea Jaramillo, the hotel's director of human resources, and Joe Bolash, the hotel's resident manager.

That's what they said, that's what they meant, and that's what they did. They spent several months working with Nathan and his job coach, visiting various worksites around the hotel, examining which ones would play to Nathan's strengths and abilities. It was never a question of whether he would fit in; rather, it was simply a matter of finding where he would fit in best.

The team determined that a position as a kitchen steward would work best for Nathan. It consisted of many regular, consistent tasks. Some of them Nathan already could perform; others he could learn at home then transfer to the job. The tasks built on his abilities to imitate others, follow directions, and match patterns. He already knew how to empty a dishwasher, and quickly caught on how to load it correctly. He collects and delivers dirty dishes to be cleaned, and sorts and stores clean dishes and silverware.

Nathan began working just two hours a day, twice per week. A little more than a year later, he is now working five to six hours a day, four times a week. He is a welcome part of the behind-the-scenes hotel

Texas Parent to Parent

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team. Every employee he passes says hello to him, and he waves back. He enjoys eating in the employee cafeteria and taking part in staff parties and events. He enjoys cashing his paycheck every other Thursday and taking part of it to Starbucks to buy his favorite drink.

Not long after Nathan began working at the Hilton, his mother stopped to thank Ms. Jaramillo for her help in giving Nathan a great first job. She thanked her and her staff for helping him fit in so well.

"We have 21 languages spoken here, and his is just another language," she said. How true. If only all citizens saw it from that perspective, what a wonderful world this would be - for people with and without disabilities.

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