

A CULTURE OF GIVING

Told by Ann Bauer

For eight years, Esther Diaz rose early two days each week and dressed for her job at the Target store in Lavern, California. There she served customers from behind the counter on “Food Avenue,” folded towels, hung clothes, marked prices, and always earned the highest marks from her superiors. Esther is a remarkable employee who just happens to have a mental disability and happens to have a job because of Target Stores’ recruiting program, “I Can Do That.”

It began in 1988 when Dwight Bonds, a high-school teacher, devised a plan to help Esther and three of her classmates who were developmentally disabled make the transition from graduation to the workforce.

“I called Target’s regional office and explained what I was looking for,” Bonds says. “My students need an opportunity and a little extra support transitioning into the workplace.” He was pleased with Target’s response. “They said, ‘We’ll make them a part of our family,’ ” he says. “They offered them regular jobs, with the same benefits and wages paid to other employees.”

The store came through with frontline jobs as well as job coaches. Bonds drilled the students on skills they would need, such as money counting and alphabetic filing. At work, Esther Diaz’s managers discovered she was dependable and attentive to every job she was assigned, including those in which other workers tended to lose interest.

“You never see Esther just standing around,” commented her supervisor, Hope Cantwell. “She’s always working hard.” Within five months the arrangement proved so successful, Target placed twenty-five more mentally challenged students in thirteen California locations.

Bonds calls it a win-win-win situation. Young people get jobs. Parents who feared their kids would be dependent for life see that they are able to work and be productive. And businesses find out that the disabled can make great employees.

The program grew by leaps and bounds, eventually benefiting more than 1,500 severely disabled workers in 736 Target stores nationwide. Customer response was fantastic. Letters poured into the national office complimenting the workers and praising the company for giving them a chance. The company incorporated the program into their everyday hiring process.

Minneapolis-based Target Corporation has been a national leader in charitable giving and social action for more than fifty years. George Draper Dayton began this culture of giving in 1909 by donating \$500,000 from his department store to charity. “Success by contribution is open to everyone,” wrote Dayton. “The thrills of relieving distress, of encouraging the young or ministering to the aged, of easing the footsteps of the weary—are these not rewards greater than the knowledge you have added thousands of dollars to your hoard?”

Fortunately, the heirs to Dayton’s growing empire inherited their grandfather’s generous spirit. In 1946 they created the “Five-Percent Rule,” under which 5 percent of the corporation’s pre-tax profits are set aside and reinvested in the community. In 1974, a particularly hard year

for the retail industry, Dayton employees voted to keep the five-percent covenant even if their salaries had to be cut. Today this amounts to \$ 1 million a week given back to the communities Target serves.

Thanks in part to Dayton's leadership, the Twin Cities ranks as one of the most giving corporate communities in the United States. The Greater Minneapolis Chamber of Commerce sponsors the 5% Club for over two hundred other members.

In 1996, Target Corporation celebrated its fiftieth anniversary of giving with the "50 Acts of Giving Day." Volunteers from more than one hundred Target stores across the country helped their communities by cleaning up parks, assisting the elderly, and removing debris from the Mississippi River Bank. "Employees rolled up their sleeves, donating time and energy," says Laysha Ward, director of the Target Foundation. "Our team member volunteers reflect the heart of this company and our commitment to our communities."

When a district team leader, Kim Diccico, and her Southern California colleagues learned that the Special Olympics would be held on the same day as the 50 Acts of Giving Day, she rallied to take them on as a joint cause. Thanks to her recruiting efforts, more than four hundred Target employees from seventy stores volunteered for the weekend events. On opening night they formed a huge cheering section to welcome the athletes. For the next two days, during the competitions, they shouted encouragement from the sidelines and handed out medals. "We did a lot of screaming, yelling, and high-fiving," Kim remembers.

Ian Eaton, a young man hired through the "I Can Do That" program, ran with the Olympic torch in front of the store where he works as a cart

attendant. The street was lined with people cheering him on.

“When Ian was coming down the street, we announced it over the loudspeaker in the store. Everyone just poured out the doors,” recalls his supervisor, Karla Burgess. Even customers left their shopping carts and ran outside to cheer for Ian.

“That was fun!” Ian told his supervisor. “I saw you waving to me!”

The week after the race, Ian’s supervisor had to slow him down a few times, because he was still running through the store. Karla smiles. “He just forgets he’s not still on the track with all of us cheering him on.”

Small kindnesses make a community whole and lift up all of its members.

ANN BAUER

Create a culture of giving. Strengthen your own community by becoming involved; meet your neighbors; volunteer for school functions and community events; or become a **Special Olympics** coach. Call 800-700-8585, or visit www.specialolympics.org.