

Walgreens

By Ross Norton, Contributing Writer

BREAKING barriers and BUILDING careers

A tour through the Walgreens Anderson Distribution Center stops near a large sign with “THEM” in the center. The word is encircled with a slash through it — a universal symbol telling everyone the word “them” is not allowed.

One visitor says, casually, “I can’t really tell who ‘them’ is.”

The comment causes Angela Mackey’s face to erupt in smile. It’s a moment of professional and personal victory for Mackey. As the company’s career outreach coordinator in Anderson, Mackey’s mission is to keep the conveyors moving with the help of capable disabled employees. As a person living with cerebral palsy, Mackey knows all too well what it’s like being one of *them*.

She believes deeply and passionately that the disabled are more than capable of earning an honest living alongside the rest of society. And at the Anderson Distribution Center, they’re proving it.

About 170 of the facility’s employees — 37% of their work force — have a disability. Those workers receive bulk goods at the facility, then store, pick and ship the orders

that keep shelves full at more than 300 Walgreens stores around the South. They do it in 689,000 square feet of space that rises 10 stories high. They go 24 hours a day, five days a week. And they do it with the company’s highest accuracy rate.

Mackey, for one, is not surprised that they get it done so efficiently.

Unemployment is high among the disabled, and when given a chance, they’re motivated to deliver. Mackey herself applied for 250 jobs before she found work, and that was after graduating from Anderson University and then Clemson University with a master’s degree and a 4.0 grade point average.

“As soon as I walked in [to job interviews] I knew I didn’t have it because their eyes would drop to the ground and they would think, ‘Oh, what am I going to do with her?’”

Mackey found work first with the South Carolina Vocational Rehabilitation Department, but moved to the Walgreens Anderson facility (which is actually in Williamston), shortly after the distribution center opened in 2007.

At Walgreens, she found a company eager

to employ the disabled, but with no clear plan on how to go about it.

Larry Kraemer, human resources manager for the Anderson Distribution Center, says they first attempted what everyone else does when trying something new: they looked to see how others were doing it. What they found, for the most part, is that others were not. Not the way they’re now getting it done in Anderson, where disabled workers are paid equal wages and work side by side with everyone else — where “them” and “us” are virtually indistinguishable to tour groups.

The Walgreens commitment to diversity is easy to see in company literature and structure. In addition to its South Carolina efforts to employ the disabled, the company also has a clear plan for a diverse work force in race, religion and gender. The company formed an executive diversity council in 2006, chaired by Walgreens chairman and CEO Jeffrey A. Rein. The company mission statement includes the lines, “We will treat each other with respect and dignity and do the same for all we serve. We will offer employees of all backgrounds a place to build careers.”

THEM

*There is no "them" or "us" at the Walgreens Distribution Center in Anderson, according to Angela Mackey, career outreach coordinator, and Larry Kraemer, human resources manager.
(Photo/Niill Silver)*



In a statement on diversity, Rein says "differences are not good, not bad, just different, and very powerful when we take the time to understand and learn from each other."

For diversity as it applies to disabled workers, the Illinois-based company has a champion in Randy Lewis, senior vice president for logistics and distribution. As the father of an autistic child now entering his adult years, the dignity of fair wages and compassionate coworkers means a lot to him.

But Lewis is a business executive, not a volunteer, and the bottom line had to remain the bottom line. Planning for the facility began in 2003, and Lewis says company officials decided then to build a productive center with an inclusive environment.

"We wanted a sustainable model because we are a business, not a charity," he says. "We wanted to maintain the same high productive standards for everyone — both disabled and typically-abled. In this building, everyone earns the same rate, does the same jobs and is held to the same standards."

While the South Carolina site had the backing of the corporate office, it was up to

those at the Anderson Distribution Center to figure out how to get it done. They did it one step at a time, Kraemer says, one applicant at a time, one job at a time.

"Over the last year and a half, we've just kind of moved along," Kraemer says. "Not knowing how to do it, we just did it."

Helping steer the way were the local community, the school districts, the South Carolina Department of Disabilities and Special Needs and the South Carolina Vocational Rehabilitation Department.

"Our success is really a story of success with partners," Kramer says.

For Larry Bryant, director of the South Carolina Vocational Rehabilitation Department, it's a partnership that seemed like a divine gift when Walgreens came knocking.

"They said they were ready to employ people with significant disabilities," Bryant says. "They didn't want people with only minor disabilities just to say they employ the disabled."

"You just look beyond the disability and see the person. Disabilities become so normal that they just fall into the background."

- Larry Kraemer, human resources manager

Walgreens' Lewis and SCVRD's Bryant both claim the relationship was an instant success. Walgreens wanted to use the latest technology to enable good jobs for the disabled and the state agency felt it had a solid, employable work force ready to use that technology.

However, before the distribution center could start delivering the company's best performance; before they would start changing the attitude of the

state's employers; and before they would become a national model, the folks at the South Carolina location had to figure out how to do it.



Top: It's the company's mission to keep the conveyors moving with the help of capable disabled employees. About 170 of employees — 37% of the work force — at the distribution center have a disability. (Photo/Niill Silver)

Left: Other big name companies including Lowe's and The Home Depot have visited the facility to learn how Walgreens has been able to accommodate its employees. (Photo/Niill Silver)

"Employers have two big concerns when they consider hiring the disabled: Is it going to raise insurance and what if someone gets hurt?" Mackey says. "But I'm telling you personally, I have learned in my life how to be careful because I know what it's like to fall in the middle of a crowd and humiliate myself. So in my mind, people with disabilities are more careful."

For Kraemer, the model they've created just makes sense.

"The labor market is getting tighter and tighter. It's harder and harder to find people," he says. "This is an opportunity for them to get a job and an opportunity for us to fill a job."

Walgreens provides training for all employees so that those without disabilities learn how to work along with those who do, and the disabled employees learn to work along with their colleagues.

"Really, you work here a while and disabilities just become like somebody's hair color. You don't even see it. You just look beyond the disability and see the person. Disabilities become so normal that they just fall into the background," Kraemer says.

Now the Walgreens Anderson Distribution Center is a destination for other companies looking for solutions. Lowe's, The Home Depot and others have gone to Williamston to see how it gets done at Walgreens.

The SCVRD has been approached by the likes of CVS and Wal-Mart, not looking for Walgreens' trade secrets, but for the key to finding solid employees where others may not see them.

The SCVRD's Bryant believes the trails Walgreens blazed are making things better for employers and potential employees in the state.

"When we go out there [among potential employers], the reception is better than it's ever been," Bryant said. "The example of Walgreens will serve our citizens with disabilities very, very well."

The program serves taxpayers and citizens of South Carolina, too, according to Bryant.

"It has meant all kinds of things for the state. For one, it's showcased South Carolina in the national news. It's been great publicity for South Carolina and great for people with disabilities because it shows that people with disabilities can work if given the opportunity," Bryant says. "And if they weren't working, a lot of them would be drawing Social Security." ■

"As a company, we realized that we couldn't do it ourselves," Mackey says. "We needed the community to embrace this and they have. All I have to do is get on the phone and they're here for us."

The SCVRD trains candidates for the Walgreens jobs. Technology helped open doors, too. Work station computers are operated by touch screens, for example, and robots and automation help keep orders accurate and inventory stored.

In the end, according to Mackey, success takes identifying and using the talents of

everyone willing to work.

Mackey says they have been able to do this by giving everyone a chance. Disabilities run the gamut, from the sight and hearing impaired, to mental retardation and developmental disabilities, to bad backs and diabetes.

"We're a melting pot of disabilities," she says. When the time came to accommodate those varying disabilities, Mackey says they simply took one case at a time and figured out how to accommodate the skills of their new employees.