

'Amazing people' work at Opportunity Enterprises



A reminder posted on the wall inside Opportunity Enterprises in Valparaiso. (Jerry Davich / Post-Tribune)

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Ruben greeted me like we were old friends last week, though we had never met.

"Hello, my name is Ruben. Welcome to Opportunity Enterprises," he said, reaching to shake my hand. "This is one of the best places around for us."

Without asking him a single question, he offered the well-rehearsed patter he tells most guests at Opportunity Enterprises Inc. in Valparaiso.

"Most clients who you see here have different challenges and different needs in their lives. Just like with your life in every way," said Ruben, who's been a client for more than a decade. "We have jobs, too, just like everybody else. I wish people could understand this."

Ten years ago this week, I first visited "O.E." as it's called in the community. The organization bills itself as a not-for-profit agency promoting self-sufficiency for roughly 1,000 challenged individuals across Northwest

Indiana.

During my initial visit there, I learned that "challenged" comes in many forms, from many disabilities, and through many faces. O.E.'s catchy tagline is, "We're in the business of amazing people." And it's true, on multiple levels.

One of the first clients I met 10 years ago was Anita, who has since passed away. We were raised as kids across the South Shore railroad tracks from each other in Miller. She graduated Wirt High School in 1979, one year before me.

I don't remember much about her, but I recall her getting teased by other students.

As I wrote in a 2007 column, "It was a different time, with different social rules, and teenagers of any era sometimes prefer cruelty to kindness. Looking back, I don't remember teasing Anita. But I also don't remember stopping other kids from teasing her. I probably did neither."

"Even back then, I was more of an observer than a participant. Anyway, Anita was the kind of girl who, well, I don't know. I never bothered to find out," I wrote.

During that first visit to O.E., I learned about Anita, her hardships as a kid, her health problems since high school, including two kidney transplants and two years on dialysis. She was born with tuberous sclerosis, a rare genetic disorder causing tumors to form in different organs.

I remember Anita being so kind to me during my visit to O.E. despite how I may have treated her in our childhood.

I also have never forgotten what a business-savvy woman named Mabel told me before I left O.E. that day. For side cash, she sold homemade "Purr-fect Treats" for cats, and "Dog-gone Treats" for dogs.

"Do you have a dog or cat?" she asked me.

"No, I don't really like pets," I replied.

She stared at me in disbelief, as if I just ate my last pet.



Mabel told me she loved pets, and she had many at her Chesterton home, including a rat, a dog, a fish and two chinchillas. I asked her why she likes pets so much.

"Because pets like me back," she replied without a hint of pathos. "People aren't like pets."

Last week, I made new friends during my return visit and I also bumped into old friends.

"Hi Jerry, how have you been?" asked Melissa, 39, who was working on counting money with help from a computer and an aide.

Melissa was born with Cornelia De Lange Syndrome, a genetic disorder affecting one in every 10,000 live births that causes learning disabilities.

"I'll tell my mother I saw you," Melissa told me with a tight hug.

In the facility's arts and crafts room, Lauren, 37, made a handcrafted birthday gift for her mother.

"Hi Jerry, I like your shoes," she told me. "When is your birthday? What do you do?"

This is one of the few places where I'm asked more questions than I ask. I love it.

O.E.'s main complex is still a finely-tuned operation where several programs work in sync. There's a production line workshop providing local and regional businesses with piecework goods, and providing O.E. clients with low-end manufacturing jobs.

The sprawling facility continues to house a booming business of shredding papers – up to 20 tons each week – for roughly 1,200 customers across Northwest Indiana.

The facility launched a new curriculum-based program last month called TREND, an acronym for Technology, Recreation, Education, Nature and Discovery.

"This program offers a structured, small group curriculum allowing clients opportunities to participate in creative activities such as art, music, and poetry," said Kacie Ensign, the agency's development director. "They learn self-sufficiency skills such as cooking while working on projects to increase cognitive ability along with ample opportunities for fun and engaging interaction with peers."

"They work here for 45 minutes and then move on to the next program," said Becky Jascoviak, communications director.

It seems like a wonderful initiative. However, for this column, I couldn't help but focus on the agency's clients, who are pretty darn amazing, as billed in O.E.'s mission statement.

This is why I agreed to emcee the organization's annual Power of Potential celebration of achievement 8:30 a.m. Thursday at Aberdeen Manor in Valparaiso.

Several clients will be recognized for their amazing achievements. How could I say no? (Tickets for \$20 are still available. Call 464-9621, ext. 333 or visit www.oppent.org.)

"I want people to better understand us," Ruben told me as we parted ways.

"OK, I'll write about you guys in my newspaper column," I replied.

"Promise?" he asked.

Promise.

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