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Creating Meaningful, Community-Based Social Networks

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Creating Meaningful, Community-Based Social Networks

FUN FOR EVERYONE!

Social Inclusive Networking Connections

Cynthia R. Chambers, PhD

Ever had a group of people that you said, "I sure do like hanging out with them!?" In the East Tennessee Tri-Cities area, a group of individuals with and without disabilities said that exact statement. With a vision in mind, Drew Shortt, a middle school teacher in Washington County, created Social Inclusive Networking Connections (INC) in collaboration with East Tennessee State University (ETSU) and families of individuals with varying disabilities. "I kept hearing parents say that they needed a social outlet for their kids and their families," said Shortt. "Together with parents like Amy Wenk and Susan Hiscutt, we envisioned Social INC and thought, what a fun way to fulfill this need in our community."

Social INC is a group designed to offer social and service opportunities for people with and without disabilities, which is a part of its mission. A major goal of Social INC is to provide age appropriate activities in which a social community can blossom. This inclusive program gives individuals of all abilities increased opportunities to meet new friends in a safe, welcoming environment. It is open to individuals of all age levels with some social activities specifically targeted for school-aged children or adults.

Social INC's social activities are casual, fun events and activities related to group interaction and recreation. For example, the group has participated in bowling, bounce houses, Fender's Farm, Olympic Day at ETSU, family race night at Volunteer Speedway, Speedway in Lights, whitewater rafting, Zumba, sign language classes, game night, and a variety of large group festivals. Through business partnerships, many of the above activities were offered at free or reduced pricing.

Community-based events and activities related to



Jack and Kyle Killman
rafting the Nolichucky
River with Social INC.

Photo by Cheryl Killman

service and philanthropy are also provided in Social INC. These are hands-on projects that aim to give back to our neighbors or others in far off lands, like writing to the troops overseas, supporting children in need during the holidays, and shopping for and packing buckets for Liberia. Social INC has adopted the idea that we, as a group, want to be actively involved in change in our community, rather than just passive recipients of services.

Social INC is maintained by a key group of people who keep the activities organized and implemented. However, it's important to note that the success of this group is because its participants value the connections that are being made across each event and see Social INC as an enriching piece of their lives. "Social INC has provided for my son and family the opportunity to participate in many activities that we otherwise might not be involved in, and to share them with other families with similarities," said Shannon Fauver. "Our children are able to be themselves and enjoy their experiences without the pressures of fitting in. What a blessing this program is! We are always looking forward to the next adventure!"

Because Social INC strives to be inclusive of individuals of all abilities and backgrounds, the diversity of its participants adds a unique quality to this group. When a person comes to a Social INC activity or event, they are assured to be accepted in a welcoming environment. Social INC participants are greeted like long lost friends, or as some have said, "like family".

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2013-14 Partners in Policymaking Class

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After recognizing and experiencing some of the challenges in acquiring services for her children, Elizabeth Stivers decided she had to be part of the solution. Larry Walls is trying to hone his passion for advocating for persons with disabilities, to lead to "real life changes", and "real positive life outcomes".

All different reasons for applying to the Partners in Policymaking Leadership Institute, and all excellent ones. These individuals and 17 others were accepted into the 2013-14 Partners class. Almost immediately the class bonded, thanks to the program's balance of informative sessions from experts in the disability field and interactive activities. It's a driven group that can be deadly serious, but that also enjoys, and needs, a good hearty laugh from time to time. They learn from each other, and support one another in their individual journeys to make life better for themselves, for their loved ones, and for their community members.

Please join the Council on Developmental Disabilities in welcoming the newest participants in the Council's 20-year-old leadership and advocacy training program!

For more information about the Partners training, or to get an application for the 2014-15 Partners class, please contact Ned Andrew Solomon at ned.solomon@tn.gov, or by phone at 615.532.6566. The training is free, and open to adults with disabilities and family members of persons with disabilities.

The application deadline for the next class is April 30, 2014.

working together to solve challenging problems, being open-minded about new creative solutions, and always maintaining the perspective of an individual with disabilities encountering these services."

Advocates for meaningful community employment opportunities for people with disabilities should be encouraged by recent developments in our state. In addition to the Employment First executive order and

FUN FOR EVERYONE!

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This initiative has also been a source of positive, inclusive experiences for future special educators and other university students. Many university students



Ciera Poland, Drew Shortt, Melissa Jordan and Catherine Miller at Bristol Motor Speedway.

participate in Social INC for their own social engagement, while others may use the activities and events as service learning opportunities. "As a future teacher, I learned that recreation and expanding social spheres are one of the difficulties not being

addressed through school systems," said Tei Takenaka, a recent graduate of the ETSU Special Education program. "[Social INC] was also a great opportunity to put my knowledge from college courses into practice."

New activities and events are constantly being developed for this evolving program. This upcoming year, Social INC is partnering with Leaping Lizards Family Indoor Fun to offer a Chameleon Kids Night. This recurring event will offer inclusive nights at the inflatable center located in Kingsport. There will also be a free Fall Festival in Bristol and a free Appalachian Experience event in Unicoi coordinated by ETSU Special Education course participants.

Stay tuned to Social INC's Facebook page www.facebook.com/SocialINCTN for more information!

The Creation of Tennessee's Employment First Task Force Continued from page 12

the creation of the task force, three federal employment grants have been awarded in the past couple of years to the TN Department of Labor, DIDD, and the Vanderbilt Kennedy Center. More people than ever before are intensely committed to and focused on changing the employment landscape for Tennesseans with disabilities. To learn more about the Tennessee employment initiatives, contact Emma Shouse at the Council office at 615-253-5368 or emma.shouse@tn.gov.