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It's simply The BEST



PHOTO/ THERESA PICCOLO

Participants in The BEST pilot program and their supervisor. **From left to right:** Naimo Gabow, Jar-mar Wright, Christina Edwards, Chieko Duano and Charlie Zeleya.

New program provides employment for people with disabilities

BY MISSY SCHROTT

There's a new crew of employees in town, and they promise to be The BEST.

The BEST, short for Building Employment Solutions Together, is a new community employment program for adults with disabilities. The program was developed by the Joey Pizzano Memorial Fund, a fund established by two residents who lost their six-year-old son with disabilities, Joey, to a drowning accident, and ServiceSource, a nonprofit that supplies programming for people with disabilities.

The BEST will pair teams

of people with disabilities with companies and businesses in need of light cleaning, stocking office supplies, copying, shredding and other customized tasks.

The program will operate out of a headquarters on the corner of Prince and Patrick streets, and is slated to open this summer.

Paola and Robert Pizzano, the residents behind the Joey Pizzano Memorial Fund, established the fund in 1998. Since founding the nonprofit, the Pizzanos have provided programming, funding and support for people with disabilities and their families.

One of the first programs the nonprofit developed was JPMF Splash, a water skills

and safety program specifically designed for children with disabilities. After JPMF and the Splash program gained steam, JPMF opened Our Special Harbor, a 7,000-square-foot, fully accessible waterpark in Fairfax County. Between Memorial Day and Labor Day each year, the park averages about 80,000 visitors, Paola Pizzano said.

"The idea was all along, we want to add something that was age appropriate to what Joey would've been at the time," Robert Pizzano said. "So we did the swim program for younger kids, then Our Special Harbor was for the families and the kids

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Hutchings presents ACPS FY2021 budget

School board elects leaders, considers audit of communications office

BY LUKE ANDERSON

At its first meeting of 2020, the Alexandria City School Board considered an overview of the proposed fiscal year 2021 budget and an audit of Alexandria City Public Schools' communications department. The board also voted to reelect Cindy Anderson as chair and Veronica Nolan as vice chair, leadership positions that are up for reelection every year.

Dr. Gregory Hutchings, Ed.D., presented a full overview of his proposed FY2021 budget to the board. Of the total proposed \$324.7 million, Hutchings focused primarily on the operating fund, which makes up about 92 percent of the budget.

The remaining funds go to school nutrition at 3 percent and grants and special projects at 5 percent.

The proposed FY2021 operating budget is \$299,078,231, according to an ACPS presentation. In June 2019, the school board approved an operating budget of \$286,415,016 for FY2020. The FY2021 proposal is \$12,663,215, or 4.4 percent, more than the approved FY2020 budget.

"This year, we really wanted to kind of approach our budget priorities in a very different manner and we started using our data and allowing our data to really drive our decision making so that we are very specific in regards to what those budget priorities are for the FY 2021 combined funds

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— PORT CITY —

FLAVOR



GEICO NOVA

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PHOTO/MISSY SCHROTT

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that were varying ages and then basically when you're 22, you kind of age out of the system."

"When you age out, they don't automatically see their friends every day," Paola Pizzano said. "If you don't find a place to go ... they can often be somewhat isolated."

To continue providing programming for adults with disabilities, the Pizzanos came up with The BEST. Last year, they partnered with ServiceSource to begin organizing the program.

They launched a pilot program for The BEST in August 2019 with participants from ServiceSource's Edsall Road facility, where people with disabilities are involved in classes and other activities. Since August, four of the Edsall Road participants have been acting as a trial for The BEST at the Pizzanos' construction company, Pizzano Contractors.

Twice a week, four people with disabilities spend about four hours at Pizzano Contractors' Cameron Street office, stocking the kitchen, shredding papers and cleaning up.

"I do cleaning up, [stocking] the waters, chips, snacks in the kitchen. My favorite is the waters," Naimo Gabow, one of the program participants, said.

The group of four is ac-



PHOTO/THERESA PICCOLO

Top: The organizers of The BEST. **From left to right:** Paola Pizzano of JPMF, Theresa Piccolo of ServiceSource and Robert Pizzano of JPMF.

Bottom: Charlie Zeleya wipes down a railing at Pizzano Contractors.

companied by a supervisor from ServiceSource who helps divvy up tasks and ensure they're completed properly.

"It should not be taking any type of time away from their business to make sure that those tasks are done because the supervisor is the one that's doing it," Paola Pizzano said. "So that's a big plus as well. It's not like, 'Oh they're coming in. Who's going to watch them?'"

"It's good for the businesses. It's not like an act of charity," Theresa Piccolo, director of community relations at ServiceSource, said. "Yes, you're helping the disability community, but they're going to be providing you very quality services. They're very loyal employees."

Once construction is complete on The BEST's Prince Street headquarters, the pro-

gram will expand to 16 to 20 participants who will split time between training at the headquarters and working for businesses in the community, depending on demand.

As far as tasks, the work can be customized for the businesses involved. Possibilities include sanitizing equipment or folding towels at a gym, inserting daily specials into menus at a restaurant, setting up and cleaning up for events at Waterfront Park or walking dogs at a pet daycare center.

"It's customized," Piccolo said. "We really want it to be a win-win. We'll talk to [the businesses] to see what help they need."

JPMF and ServiceSource are working to make the services affordable for busi-

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Obituary

Garnett Williams Bow

Garnett Williams Bow, 85, of Williamsburg, Virginia passed away on Jan. 2 with her husband of 64 years, Joe, lovingly by her side. She died from Alzheimer's disease.

Garnett was born in Washington D.C. to Wash and Gladys Williams. She lived in the Washington area all of her life. She attended Holton-Arms School from kindergarten through high school, made her Debut to Washington Society in 1953, attended the University of Maryland where she majored in interior design, and was a member of the Kappa Kappa Gamma sorority.

Her passions were expressing her quick wit, animals and not only seeing, but creating great beauty with gardens and

antiques. She made many contributions of time and funding to charities such as the Florence Crittenton Home, Society for Crippled Children, Holton-Arms, Gadsby's Tavern Museum, Virginia Home and Garden Tour and the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation.

Garnett is survived by, and will be dearly missed by, her husband Joe, of Williamsburg, and her daughter, Cynthia "Cini" Garnett Bow, who lives in Fort Collins, Colorado.

To respect Garnett's wishes, there will be no funeral, nor memorial services. Those wishing to honor Garnett can do so by contributing to their local animal welfare society. Online condolences may be shared at www.nelsenwilliamsburg.com.



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PHOTO/MISSY SCHROTT



PHOTO/THERESA PICCOLO

Top: Participants in The BEST pilot program. **From left to right:** Naimo Gabow, Jarmar Wright, Chieko Duano and Charlie Zeleya.
Bottom: Naimo Gabow stocks a refrigerator at Pizzano Contractors.

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nesses. The BEST dispatches teams of three or four at a fee of \$11.25 per hour per participant. The supervisor, who is paid by ServiceSource, is free to businesses.

After small fees are subtracted for things like transportation and employment taxes, The BEST participants earn \$8.70 per hour.

"That seems to be what they really like to do, to be able to come here and make their own money," Supervisor Christina Edwards said.

"They don't take work for granted," Piccolo said. "In ways, we're very privileged to have the jobs that

we have, and individuals with disabilities don't get that opportunity as easily and naturally as others do. So once they do, that's why they're incredibly loyal, because they don't want to lose that job. They want to do well and work hard."

The BEST headquarters on Prince Street will be designed like an office environment, where program participants can practice the tasks they'll be doing once they're employed. It will also be a place where program participants can spend time when they're not dispatched to different job sites.

"Once we get certain things started and they're

part of the community, we want to use that," Paola Pizzano said. "The program ends at 3 or 4 [p.m.] Our vision would be to maybe use that space as a community center type thing. Maybe we start with bingo night. ... Maybe you do a seminar on silk screening and they learn how to do scarves."

Since its headquarters won't be completed until May or June, The BEST is yet to come to Alexandria. Construction is well underway, however, and The BEST has already received positive feedback from the community, Robert Pizzano said.

"This is, I think, just going to bloom into something that's going to be huge for the special needs population," Robert Pizzano said. "It's not just a great cause, a great idea, but at the end of the day, it is very special and just the right thing to do for this population."

The BEST is hosting a kick-off event at The Loop, a new coworking space located at 215 N. Payne St., on Feb. 12. To learn more about The BEST, visit www.jpmmf.org/programs/the-best. Businesses interested in partnering with The BEST can email jpmmfbest@servicesource.org.

-mschrott@alextimes.com