



By Jay Ruderman and Nancy Kaplan Belsky

## Meet 10% challenge, and transform lives

After two years of volunteering around the office, 24-year-old Marie has her first real job. And not only is she delighted, but the staff at Gateways: Access to Jewish Education knows Marie will take care of many of the tasks that arise. Now, whether she is photocopying or laminating, filing documents or serving the snack at the Sunday program, Marie keeps busy and happy.

For her new employers, the fact that Marie has Down syndrome isn't what defines her. It's the contribution she's making.

It's also a good time of year for Julie. This summer, the 27-year-old was hired by the JCCs' Camp Grossman as an assistant in the sports department. But this season of gainful employment stands in contrast with the rest of the year. Though Julie looks forward to working weekends during the fall harvest at the Belkin family's Lookout Farm, during the rest of the year she faces a disheartening draught. She keeps knocking on the doors of businesses, Jewish institutions, agencies and synagogues; yet when they see she has a developmental disability, they say they can't use the help. Unable to secure more than a few hours work here and there, she volunteers at the JCC preschool, hoping the experience will build her resume.

For Jason there isn't even a good season. He's 29 now, and it's been years since he stopped applying for jobs. Once employers realize he has autism, that he sometimes surprises people with his enthusiastic outbursts, they don't want to take a chance. His parents worry that he spends his days on online chat rooms.

As we mark the 20th anniversary year of the Americans with Disabilities Act, we are issuing a challenge to area Jewish agencies to commit to hiring more individuals with disabilities like Marie, Julie and Jason.

A job not only brings in income and lessens dependence on government programs, it greatly contributes to self-esteem and connection to community. In addition, each person with a disability who's functioning in the workplace does much to reverse stereo-

types for everyone with whom they come into contact. In fact, the importance of providing training, placement and most of all jobs is the focus of a workshop at ADVANCE: The Ruderman Jewish Special Needs Funding Conference, a Jewish Funders Network event this fall in New York ([www.jfund.org](http://www.jfund.org)).

But for all the public awareness campaigns about the contributions individuals with disabilities can make in the workplace, they remain overwhelmingly under-employed. Just imagine the jobs they could perform – and do well: mail room clerk, child-care worker, home health aide, cook, maintenance and landscape worker, to name but a few.

By establishing – and working diligently toward – a goal that 10 percent of the workforces of our Jewish agencies represent individuals with disabilities, we can live up to the highest values of our religion. It also makes sound financial sense. Businesses report that people with disabilities have lower absentee rates and higher retention rates than other employees.

By showing successful job placements in our community, we can call on businesses to follow our lead.

We are fortunate that we have expert help here. CHAI Works, a Jewish Family & Children's Service program, supports those with disabilities through skill-building, job development and job coaching, and by building and maintaining employer relationships. Its Mitzvah Team helps with volunteer placement as a way to build skills and confidence that could lead to employment. Jewish Vocational Services' Connections program assists Jewish individuals with mental illness and other disabilities through career counseling, education planning, and placement services.

Such training efforts are crucial, but unless the jobs are made available, frustration – and a tragic waste of human potential – is inevitable. Please find out who does the hiring at your congregation or favorite Jewish organization or agency. What better place to start than our own organizations to embrace this commitment so that all Jewish adults realize they are a true asset to our community, so each one can find a place?

And that is why our two foundations are stepping forward with a challenge to our Boston Jewish community to commit to hiring people with disabilities.

Jay Ruderman is president of the Ruderman Family Foundation and Nancy Kaplan Belsky is vice president of the Rita J. and Stanley H. Kaplan Family Foundation.

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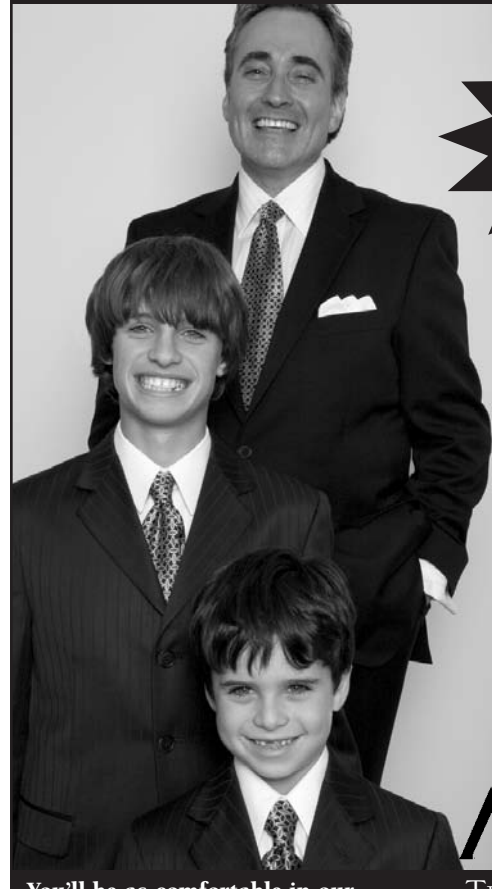
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