

TRANSITIONS

This Parsippany gym is helping students with disabilities find 'a sense of purpose'

2-minute read



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PARSIPPANY — Julia Frances Vargas feels at home in the gym.

She grew up participating in adaptive sports programs for basketball, soccer, bowling and other activities. Most days after school, she rides a Peleton bike.

Frances Vargas, who has Down syndrome, has an internship at Crunch Fitness in Parsippany. She also works out there twice a week. Long term, however, she hopes to do more than just wipe down treadmills and vacuum.

"I want to be a chef, because food is my passion," said Frances Vargas, a 21-year-old from Upper Saddle River. "I want to follow my dreams."

For now, Frances Vargas is getting experience at Crunch as part of a new work-based learning partnership with the Calais School, a private school in Whippany for students with disabilities. Five of them work at Crunch three days a week, for a couple of hours each day.

Students at the high school and its 12 Plus program for those ages 18 to 21 can also intern in interior design, child care, and fashion and food retail, among other fields.

Only 34% of adults with intellectual disabilities are employed, according to a study by the Center for Social Development and Education at the University of Massachusetts Boston. Almost all adults with intellectual disabilities are underemployed, either because they are not full time or earn less than minimum wage.

About 83% of neurotypical working-age adults are in the labor force.

"We want to ensure everyone in our community has an opportunity to feel great and have fun," Crunch Parsippany general manager Richard Evanieceki said while giving a tour of the facility. "It helps the young men and women have a sense of purpose, and skills that will transfer wherever they go."

Connor Sefchick also interns at Crunch, usually at the front desk, but doesn't find it very challenging. He said his "actual job" is as a floor supervisor at the Somerset Hills YMCA near his family's Basking Ridge home.

The 19-year-old, who grew up exploring via New Jersey Transit after school, hopes to someday be accepted into the assistant conductor training program.

"That's where his heart is, with the trains. It truly is the place where he feels at home," said Connor's mom, Suzy Sefchick, noting that Connor is "a very high functioning autistic."

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Connor Sefchick has attended Calais for five years, and can stay until he is 21. Frances Vargas graduated from a special education program at Pascack Hills High School in Bergen County, where she was part of the bowling team. She started at the Calais School in January, and has been interning at Crunch since the spring.

Alexandra Vargas isn't sure what's in her youngest daughter's future after she graduates from Calais in June.

Bergen Community College hosts the Turning Point program for students with disabilities. Julia expressed interest in a culinary arts program at County College of Morris, then possibly a cooking school. She said her specialty is eggs, but she's trying to eat small portions because she wants to lose 5 pounds from her compact, 4-foot-9 frame.

'When she moves, she'll move you': North Jersey teen athlete battles back from paralysis

"It's the work ethic, the responsibility. It's a job, which is a big thing," said Alexandra Vargas, who got Julia playing basketball, soccer, tennis and other sports through "Ramsey is for Everyone" on Saturdays and a similar Sunday program in Upper Saddle River.

"They think 'special needs' and 'they can't,' but they can. They may not do it the same as others, but they adapt."

Jane Havsy is a storyteller for the Daily Record and DailyRecord.com, part of the USA TODAY Network. For full access to live scores, breaking news and analysis, subscribe today.

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