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FEATURED

Pandemic cuts number of clients at ERDAC, still producing holiday crafts

BY JIM ROMSAAS MESABI TRIBUNE

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Alex Willis uses hot glue to attach pine cones to the roof of a bird house Friday at the East Range Development pieces are popular as Christmas items in the center's gift shop.

Mark Sauer

EVELETH — While visiting the ERDAC special projects area Friday morning, Willie Lusti was intensely focused on constructing a Christmas tree using birch bark.

Across the room, Alex Willis could be seen smiling behind his mask as he hot glued pine cone pieces — which served as shingles — to the top of a birdhouse.

Throughout the East Range Developmental Achievement Center in Eveleth, the clients were hard at work and loving what they were doing.

“It’s fun to make them,” Lusti said of his birch bark Christmas tree. “I like to have fun.”

In the loom room, Kyle Grave manned the loom to make rag rugs. He also likes working at the Cherry Greenhouse when possible and in the wood shop.

“Everything’s my favorite job here,” he said.

ERDAC Executive Director Robin Harkonen said that is the sentiment of all of the clients.

She just wishes more clients could be working now, but the numbers have been cut by two-thirds due to COVID-19 restrictions.

“We can serve up to 96 clients” in non-COVID times, but the client workforce is now at 33%, she added. “It’s a huge bummer in several ways.”

The private, non-profit agency for adults with intellectual disabilities gets calls every day about when the other clients will be able to return to work.

Harkonen also has annual meetings with the clients (now on Zoom), which “are heartbreaking.” During “at least 90% of the meetings, the person that receives our services is crying and saying ‘I want to come back.’” Harkonen has no answers for them due to the pandemic, which continues to rage.

The last time all the clients were working was on March 19.

“As you can imagine, they’re nearing the nine-month mark of not coming to work, not seeing their friends, not being with their peers, not having anything to do during the day,” Harkonen told the Mesabi Tribune. “I think that’s the most important takeaway when our clients talk to people is that coming to work gives them a sense of purpose and they’re contributing.”

The goal for the clients in the work training program is “that they receive proper training skills, work skills, social skills to be able to move beyond our facility into competitive employment.”

Harkonen said that is ERDAC’s goal, but it’s not necessarily their goal. A lot of clients have tried competitive employment and didn’t like it and have chosen to be here.

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“That doesn’t change the fact that our goal for them is to move beyond our walls into a totally integrated community job.”

“Our mission is that everyone in this building has ability and whether that ability takes somebody working hand over hand with them or frequent breaks or a very small portion of the job, that’s what we’re about. That’s how we can accommodate,” Harkonen added.

Back in the special projects area, Lusti was proud to say a birch bark Christmas wreath already sold. Willis was equally excited about his Santa wreath, which had a special spot on a nearby door.

Other Christmas and holiday crafts and more are sold in the second floor gift shop, which is open daily.

“The things that are made out there are made by our clients. When they finish those items there is such pride in what they’ve done,” Harkonen said.

The list of jobs and projects undertaken at ERDAC seems almost endless.

In the wood shop, clients stain and assemble sauna mats and decorative bears, make cribbage boards or perfect their woodworking skills.

The bears make their way to the painting room for chalk painting. That is where Jessica Montzka was waxing a mirror project. Montzka has also done cleaning jobs at Northern Tractor Equipment.

In another room, clients were washing flower pots for the Cherry Greenhouse. The number of pots washed each year totals between 10,000 and 13,000.

Clothing suitable for just rags was being examined for snaps or other scratchy metal before it was cut up and boxed up in 10- and 25-pound boxes. The final destination for most of the rags is the local mines. In the process, zippers are removed and donated for zipper art and buttons are sold and donated to local schools.

The clothes in good condition go back to the Disabled American Veterans or are donated to Bois Forte, Bill’s House and to other causes, as well.

The clients are introduced to each room and can pick their favorite area, Harkonen said.

“They tell me where they want to work.”

Working and being with their friends is what they want to do, she added. And those that can’t be out working (due to COVID) are affected emotionally and/or physically.

“We’ve had several people experience great depression, debilitating depression quite honestly. We’ve had several people that have had increased mental health symptoms where it’s caused some hospitalization. Not to get up and have a purpose every day is very difficult for any of us. But the people we serve, they have more limited coping skills, so it’s very hard for them to understand.”

Making it even harder to deal with is knowing that some of their coworkers get to go to ERDAC.

Deciding which clients get to work is a tough choice, Harkonen said. “I am totally from the heart all the time. I wear my emotions on my sleeve. It’s very difficult for me.”

The reduced number of clients also means reduced revenue for ERDAC.

The pay-for-service program had no clients from March through June (no revenue); 10% of its clients from June to July (10% revenue) and 33% clients and revenue now.

That has left ERDAC \$500,000 behind 2019 revenues to date out of a \$1.5 million budget.

Harkonen has been seeking any grant possible and ERDAC received a state grant in August “that we fought very hard for.”

Local state legislators Reps. Julie Sandstede and Dave Lislegard and Sens. Tom Bakk and Dave Tomassoni played a significant role in making the grant happen.

The advertisement features a white 2021 Subaru Outback on the right. To the left is a logo for "MORRIE'S MINNETONKA SUBARU" with a "VIEW INVENTORY" button. In the center, there's a large blue graphic with a hand holding a heart, the text "2021 Outback", "FINANCING FOR AS LOW AS 0% APR FOR 63 MONTHS", and "SUBARU". To the right of the car is a "share the love" logo with the text "EVENT". At the bottom right, it says "Terms and Conditions Apply".

“That is quite amazing to have them be that strong and to fight that hard for us,” Harkonen stated.

“I really believe without their support this wouldn’t have happened. We were able to get a one-time retention grant of last January’s revenues,” which definitely “helped us keep the doors open.”

Harkonen feels fortunate to get that grant and others to keep the cash flow and programs going because “when programs close, nobody’s reopening up. This is not a money making proposition. This is a human services non-profit field and you live on pretty much a day-to-day basis. Nobody can survive this for the long haul without help,” she said.

Harkonen urged anyone that wants to shop at the gift shop or just visit to call 744-5130. Those interested can also like ERDAC on Facebook and check out erdac.org online.

Doing so will be well worth it, according to the executive director.

“We feel like we’re the best kept secret that we don’t want to be. We want people to know about us. We want people to know that we’re here. We want people to know that we have clients that can bring a lot to the workforce. If people are looking to hire, we have people that can do those jobs.

“We want people to come in. We want people to know what we are. The more that we get that out there, the more support we bring in and the more opportunities there are for the people that we serve — all of our clients.”