

## The Aquarium of the Pacific



The Aquarium of the Pacific at Long Beach is providing free admission to all disabled

people for their Festival of Human Abilities on the weekend of January 29-30. Each disabled person can bring with them one non-disabled person, free of the admission fee. Visitors can view the brand new Sea Otter Exhibit, tour the many stunning aquariums, touch a shark in the Shark Lagoon,

and explore the sonic language of the whale.

All Step Up members who are planning on going to the event must contact the MAC President or Vice-President. Each participant must bring with them a special coupon, as offered only through Step Up. Enjoy one of the museum gems of Los Angeles!

## A Pathway to the Work World

Step Up's Vocational Department has something special to offer any member. Each person can come in and set their unique employment goals. Step Up offers several avenues of employment. Amy Stone, the Director of Step Up on Second's Vocational Department, elaborates, "We help people put together their resumes, we help them look for outside employment, and we have an internal job training program."

Step Up endeavors to provide the support for any individual who wishes to work, even people who are currently homeless. "We help with the basics and provide access to services that help them get prepared for work. It depends on what they need. We have clients who come in before 7:00 in the morning to shower and get

ready so they are clean and presentable to work."

For many people with any disability, entering the workforce can lead to some serious soul searching. "Recognizing limitations and exploiting good qualities is really what our job is. Sometimes it's hard to look at yourself and say, I'm just not going to be able to do this, no matter how hard I try, no matter what I do."

Amy also reports that most of the barriers that people with mental illness have to overcome are the same ones that everyone must overcome, whether it's putting together a resume, undergoing an interview, asking for a raise, or even getting up to go to work. "People with mental illness lose their job usually for the same reason why most people lose their job: they don't show up for work. It isn't just because of their mental illness.

People with mental illness are generally far better employees than what you see out in the regular workforce."

Amy encourages anyone with a mental disability to disclose this fact to their employer. "I know nobody wants to. But it makes you more desirable to be employed because mental illness is a state sanctioned disability. You have an illness that's not your fault. Employers get a tax credit for hiring you, for a year if not longer. 50% of your salary is reimbursed to them. That's a big deal. For those who want to disclose, you are educating the public that mental illness is no different than having diabetes. Yes, you may need some special accommodations on occasion. In general, people with mental illness are just as employable. *Continued...*

## Pathway, continued...

In many cases, they are better employees because they are more conscious of not losing their job because of it. That's why I encourage disclosure. If you disclose, your boss can't fire you for it. You're protected. Job developers can come in and work with your employer. They can offer assistance, facilitate a conversation between you and your employer, and hopefully save your position. There's a lot of benefit to it. There are some who won't hire you, and some doors will

be closed. But do you want to work for someone who is close minded and ignorant? I'd rather work for someone more understanding."

For Amy, the most touching personal journey was a man who could only work one hour a week in the kitchen isolated from other people. He'd sweep the floor after everyone had gone home. After working with him to slowly increase his responsibilities, his confidence increased. He now successfully works in the community in

customer service, surrounded by people. Amy knows of many other members living with mental disabilities who also will not allow the hand they've been dealt dictate their achievements.

Amy is very proud of the work that the Vocational Department does for the members. "If everybody walks out of this office believing in themselves and their ability to do a hard day's work, then my staff did their job right."

## The Mindful Exercise: Yoga

For many people in this new year, exercise is high on the list of activities they want to add to their lives. Some may be enticed to play sports or try gym classes. But Step Up offers something more dynamic and relaxing on Wednesday mornings: yoga.

Gigi, the facilitator of the group, welcomes everyone of any body type and ability into Julie's Room on the third floor of Step Up on Second, which is transformed into a yoga studio complete with floor mats. She turns off the lights, puts on soft spiritual music, and first instructs people to concentrate on their breathing. "With deep breaths, we are slowing down the system and quieting the mind. It's a nice way to start the class since it's a transition. We become receptive and we work better." Each person is then encouraged and guided to gently stretch

into each pose, or asana.

Yoga has been proven to add flexibility to the body, improve the health of joints, massage the organs, and lead to excellent muscle tone. People have reported that their sense of wellbeing is vastly improved, and they tend to sleep better. Yoga alleviates certain deficiencies and counteracts negative patterns, both physical and mental.

Gigi provides her yoga students with the knowledge of not only yoga poses and the body's functioning, but also of the body's energy centers and an insight into the spiritual foundation that yoga draws upon. Yoga helps harmonize both mind and body and enhances their connection in a way few other activities can. Yoga can truly add to a person's total health. It works synergistically with other aspects of healing and

recovery: cardiovascular exercise, spirituality, good nutrition, and community support. Gigi explains, "It's not a cure all, but can be a part of the transformation that people seek when they come to Step Up."

Nancy is especially grateful for the yoga class. "I feel relaxed and more flexible, and I have greater self esteem. It helps me because I was a dancer. I gained weight because of the medications, and I had stiffness. Yoga helps me reverse it." Deidre also loves to come to the class. "I feel completely relaxed and energized."

Gigi finally adds, "Through yoga, we become more mindful, and with mindfulness we naturally become more loving toward ourselves and others."

The yoga class meets from 10am-11am on Wednesday. Wear loose clothing if possible. All else is provided.