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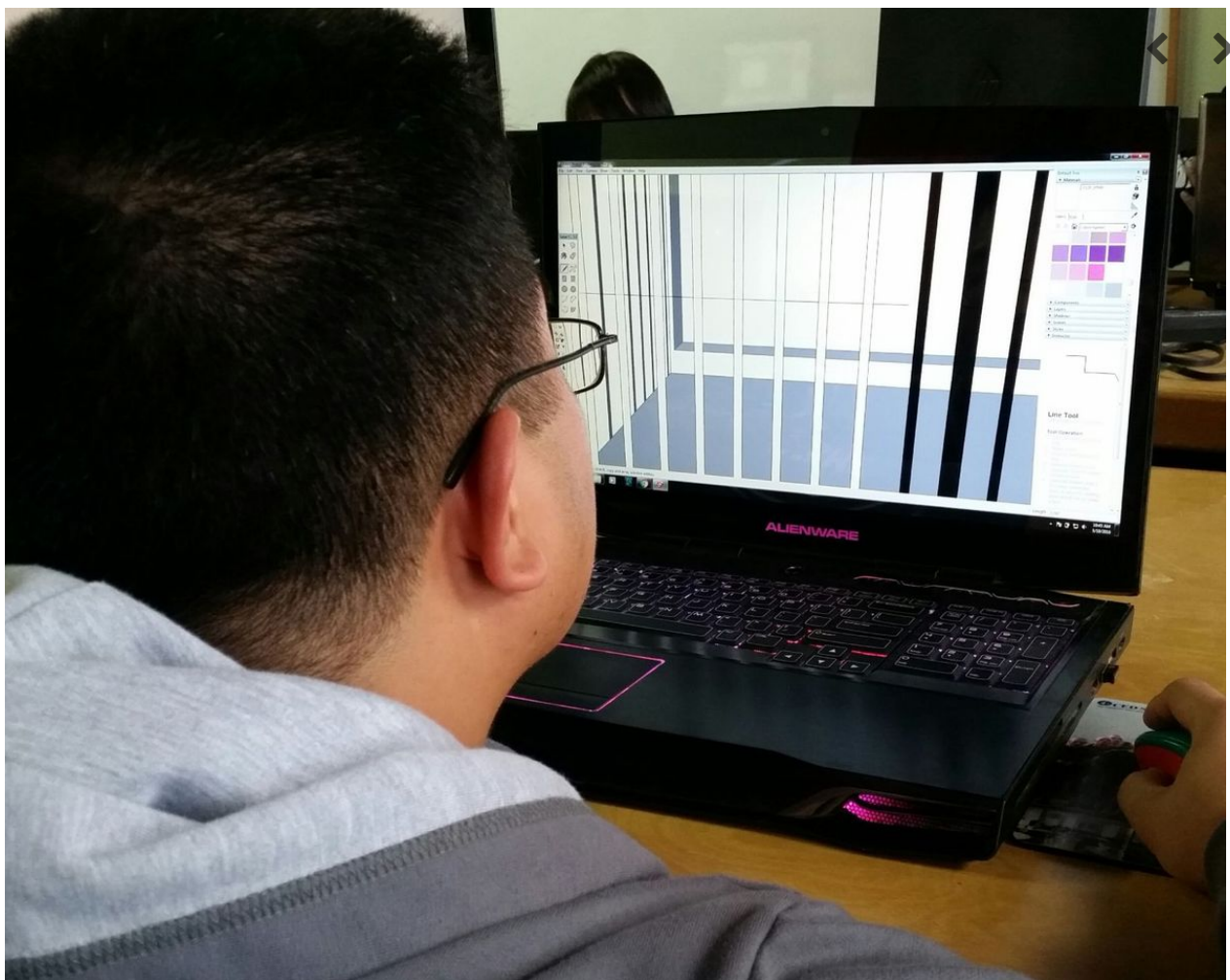
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## Jobs to match their talents

Mar-Vic Cagurangan | Post News Staff May 22, 2016



The Flame Tree Freedom Center, which runs a computer service training program in Hagatna, currently has 10 trainees, are being trained in web development, data entry and graphic designs.

A fulltime job as a computer programmer awaits J.P. A young man with autism, J.P. is among the trainees who are building a website for the government of Guam and providing related technological services for the 2016 Festival of the Pacific Arts.

“He has exceptional skills in high-tech stuff and we plan on hiring him fulltime once he completes his training in a few months,” said Eddy Reyes, founder of the Flame Tree Freedom Center, which runs a computer service training program in Hagatna.

The center currently has 10 trainees, all in their early and late 20s and a majority of whom are on the autism spectrum. They are being trained in web development, data entry and graphic designs. “The work they do is spectacular,” Reyes said. “Right now, we are working on FestPac projects such as ID cards and 3D rendering of the village of Hagatna, which is provided to the Guam Homeland Security to be used in their planning for the event.”

Studies have established a link between autism and technology. Researchers found that autistic people have excellent eyes for detail— a quality that was discovered to be a universal feature of the autistic brain. The “Wired” magazine has popularized the phrase “geek syndrome” to refer to such autistic attribute. Silicon Valley is known as the shelter for autism. Several IT companies in the mainland have been boosting their autism hires. The global business-software maker SAP, for example, recently beefed up its Autism at Work program, which was launched in 2012. While many autistic people are nonverbal, some are high-functioning and sought out for their careful attention.

While there are other nonprofit organizations that provide job training for individuals with disabilities, the Flame Tree Freedom Center is the first on Guam to offer computer training.

“The thing about individuals with autism is that they don’t get easily distracted; they are focused,” Reyes said. “They are good at anything that has to do with data entry. They function very well and do a good job. One thing we’re learning is that when they are trained, they don’t forget what they have learned. They just need to continue to grow in order to become reliable employees.”

It’s only a matter of exploring their skills and improving on them, he added.

J.P. got his first job as a housekeeper for the Flame Tree Center. “He was my first employee. I hired him after he completed his training. But he resigned because his parents were concerned about the (cleaning) chemicals that he might exposed to,” Reyes said.

J.P. landed the housekeeping job—secured through the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation — because he thought that was the only task he was capable of doing. When he came back to the program a couple of months later, the Flame Tree discovered his computer skills during the exploratory stage of his renewed training.

Among the center's 10 current trainees, J.P. is one of the two who are ready to join the workforce on a fulltime basis.

"We are hoping to expand and I wish we can take more," Reyes said.

"We hope that other businesses and governmental organizations will look to Flame Tree to help them with the computer generated needs, such as website development, 3D modeling/rendering, GIS and data entry."

The Flame Tree Center relies on public agencies to hire its clients, considering that GovGuam is mandated under affirmative action to hire a number of individuals with disabilities equivalent to 2 percent of its staff.

A former Airman, Reyes went to college in San Francisco, where he worked with a recreational center for people with disabilities. He came back to Guam in 2002, when learned that a family member was diagnosed with mental illness. Before establishing the Flame Tree Center, Reyes served as deputy director for the Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse, which was under permanent injunction resulting from a 1991 lawsuit.

The Flame Tree Freedom Center is a nonprofit organization incorporated in 2009. Flame Tree stands for Fundamental Life Application to Motivate and Empower Through Rehabilitation Empowerment and Employment.

"The primary focus is to help the undeserved population such as individual with disabilities, senior citizens and youth-at-risk. Part of their rehabilitation is to have self-worth by working," Reyes said. "It's just very recently that we started getting involved in providing services to the community. Flame Tree has embarked on this effort in part in response to the US Attorney's effort to improve workforce development opportunities, as it pertains to vulnerable populations and the disadvantaged."

Under a contract with the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation, the Flame Tree Center currently provides job training opportunities to 60 clients, in partnership with 23 local businesses engaged in various sectors such as hospitality, F&B, housekeeping, janitorial, agriculture and computer

services.

“The ideal situation is to train and hire and to have enough contracts in the system that will allow us to continue to sustain their salaries so they can live independently,” Reyes said.

Unfortunately, organizations that provide job training services to individuals with disabilities don’t meet the employment rate target. “Of the approximately 60 people I trained, I would say the hiring rate is 18 percent, which is very low,” Reyes said. “Probably it’s because a lot of businesses are not prepared, well-equipped or trained to make accommodations to people with special needs. It takes a lot of efforts.”

From the business perspective, the dilemma involves the idiosyncrasies of individuals with disabilities and how they may affect productivity. “They need to be productive to make a profit and it creates lot of human resource challenges when you’re dealing with disciplinary actions,” Reyes said. ““When you employ individuals with disabilities who need more supervision, it takes away from the productivity of that trainor or supervisor.”

Some who are under medication may have trouble waking up in the morning; others rely on paratransit which may not be available when businesses open.

One of the possible solutions to such challenge, he said, is to build a strong support system that will allow individuals with disabilities to secure a job after the training and to sustain their employment. “Before the training is completed, we need to make sure that there is some formal training that can be offered to the company on how best to treat individuals with disabilities, or some kind of agreement between the company and DVR to provide the necessary support for the employees,” Reyes said. “Once those challenges are overcome, they can be as productive as everyone else.”