



Glen Moak, owner of Duxler Tire & Car Care Center in Wilmette, talks with Brian Reed of Wilmette (far right), Megan Baer of Evanston (second from left) and JJ Hanley (far left), founder of JJ's List, a resource for businesses that strive to be accessible to people with disabilities. | Rob Dicker-Sun-Times Media

BUILDING BRIDGES

Local businesses that serve disabled hailed

By **KATHY ROUTLIFF**
kroutliffe@pioneerlocal.com

When Brian Reed, JJ Hanley and Megan Baer visited Glenn Moak at his bustling Wilmette auto care business last month, space to talk about the Bridge Builder Project was at a premium.

Eventually, however, the four settled in the tiny customer service area of Forrest's Duxler Complete Auto Care. That's where Reed, a 38-year-old wheelchair-using disabled Wilmette resident, got the chance to thank Moak for participating in the program.

"I wanted to meet with you because you are com-

munity aware and disability aware," Reed told Moak. Former Wilmette resident Baer, a life-skills tutor with the Evanston-based Center for Independent Futures, and Reed's teammate in the project, nodded. So did Hanley, the Wilmette-based creator of JJ's List, whose brainchild is the Bridge Builder Project.

Moak, an intense but publicity shy man who owns the business at 1201 Green Bay Road, and whose family owns Duxler operations in Evanston as well, happily reviewed the education packet with which the three presented him.

He promptly put up the counter display that encourages customers to post

reviews of his business' disability-friendly efforts, and told Hanley the window sticker that would identify Duxler's as sensitive to disabled customers' needs should be bigger.

Hopes it will spread

That's the kind of proactive stance Reed, Baer and Hanley hope the Bridge Builder Project will encourage and celebrate in the business community.

The project is an organic outgrowth of JJ's List, which Hanley, an award-winning documentary filmmaker, started to strengthen the economic and social futures of people with disabilities. The not-for-profit group's list is a consumer

based review website, like Angie's List, or Yelp, but it focuses its business reviews on the quality of disability awareness shown by businesses, and provides other resources for disabled people and their families.

Fueled by a \$20,000 grant to JJ's List from New Trier Township, Hanley was able to work with the Center for Independent Futures. Like JJ's list, the Evanston group works to help people with disabilities and their families live fuller and more independent lives.

Together they developed the project and use it to both encourage and laud

Businesses listed

In addition to the education packet, businesses involved in the project gain free membership on the JJ's list of disability aware businesses.

The grant also funded training for area individuals with and without disabilities to take the lesson of awareness to those businesses, work that started last November, and will run through March.

The 10 two-person teams of disabled and non-disabled people, like Reed and Baer, who visit businesses to talk to them, and thank them for their leadership, stand at the heart of the project.

The training is especially valuable to the 10 disabled team members, because it helps them build job-related skills as they interact with businesses they contact. That includes things as basic as letter writing or making phone calls, and as sophisticated as learning professional etiquette and organizational skills.

The teams put a human face on disability awareness. They also remind business owners in a very immediate way that working proactively with customers with disabilities — treating them with respect and trying to understand their needs as they do other customers' — can be good for the bottom line.

Moak said he sees no reason not to whole-heartedly

support the effort, and a lot of reasons to do so. Topping his list was compassion.

"If you don't have compassion and empathy, you shouldn't be in business," Moak said bluntly.

Business owners should also make it a point to lead by example, he added, whether for customers or employees. In his case, he believes the long-term and successful employment of a staff member with a disability has helped the rest of his work force become more disability aware.

Customers grateful

He said he began realizing the need for disability sensitivity when disabled customers thanked him and his employees for their hands-on service at the pumps.

"A couple of them said, 'Thank God you're here,' and that's when I realized we could be a help to people who, for example, couldn't get out of their car," he said.

Moak's attitude and willingness to think flexibly about serving disabled consumers is what prompted the Bridge Builder project to involve him. All the businesses project volunteers are contacting reflect similar attitudes, Hanley said. They can thus, by example, make other businesses more willing to adopt progressive and sensitive practices with their own dis-

abled customers.

"By participating in the project, they help show other local business owners how to increase their customer base, just by being welcoming and respectful of people with disabilities," Hanley said.

The project quantifies that further with the educational material teams hand out:

- An estimated one in five consumers lives with a disability, which translates to a healthy \$200 billion in annual spending from that community; and

- 22 million families in the United States have a family member with a disability, increasing the purchase power of the consumer group even further.

To date, the teams have visited about 60 businesses (Reed and Baer have visited six businesses themselves, including several in Wilmette).

Hanley said the response has been gratifying.

Reed was gratified, too. His benchmark for success was simple: "I want (businesses) to be happy when I come in."

For more information on JJ's List, visit its website at <http://www.jjslist.com/>. Information on the directory of disability-aware businesses can be viewed at http://www.jjslist.com/pages/bridge_builder_directory/.

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