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There are some people smart enough to build bridges over wide rivers, and others clever enough to send men to the moon. There are people so smart and clever they can get kids who hate math to learn how to add and subtract and have fun doing it.

Meet Linda Ehrenberg. Her gift for helping young students at the Milan Elementary School won her recognition as the 1999 Minnesota Paraprofessional of the Year.

“Linda is so exceptional,” said Carol Baker, the school’s special education instructor who had originally nominated Ehrenberg for the state award. Baker took the podium on May 21 as the school’s 140 students in grades four, five, and six joined in the gymnasium to honor their award winner. Baker figured out a long time ago why Ehrenberg is so effective at what she does. Her quick humor and upbeat nature certainly help, but her real success owes to an uncanny ability.

“She saw the strengths in each child to reach his/her hardest area,” said Baker. It is her job.

As a paraprofessional, Ehrenberg is assigned to work one-on-one with students who face challenges of many sorts. She works with children with special needs, and those with learning and behavior disabilities. Always, she’s asked to help them master the very thing they are having the most trouble with, whether it is math, English, or basic things like coordination skills.

A block, nail and hammer were what it took to help a young child with Down’s Syndrome develop the hand-to-eye coordination he lacked. “He pounded, pounded, pounded,” laughed Ehrenberg as she described the teaching aid she devised for him. She can’t explain how she comes up with the one thing that seems to work the best with any given child, but she’ll admit this much, “The tools are not always conventional.”

The elementary student who just could not do art revealed a hidden artistic flare when Ehrenberg suggested he develop his own sweatshirt design. The sweatshirt no longer fits him. But the boy’s father, in a letter nominating Ehrenberg for her award, noted, “The high school stu-
Para of the Year

Nomination Information
Do you know a paraprofessional who works harder and is more persistent than the Energizer Bunny? How about a paraprofessional who has more loyalty and commitment than Kirby Puckett? Or more determination than Wyle E. Coyote? Now is your chance to nominate this outstanding person for Para of the Year! Please include the following information—

Part 1
1. Name of Para
2. Where employed
3. Work address/phone
4. Number of years employed as a para
5. Number, type, and age of students/clients served
6. Name of Nominator
7. Nominator’s address/phone

Part 2
1. Write a short paragraph telling how this paraprofessional exhibits exemplary work skills including qualities such as —
   • Communicating effectively
   • Listening attentively
   • Taking initiative
   • Understanding his or her role in the school community/work setting
2. Describe the unique qualities or characteristics that set this paraprofessional apart from his or her peers.
   • What contributions does this para make to the school/work environment during the work day and beyond?
   • How does this para make a difference in the lives of his or her students or clients?
3. Include statements of support from students, parents, teachers, and/or peers.

Applications are being accepted until March 31, 2000

Mail or fax this information to —
Anita Cyr, Institute on Community Integration, University of Minnesota, 111 Pattee Hall, 150 Pillsbury Drive SE, Minneapolis, MN 55455, Fax (612) 624-9344.
New Para/Teacher Team of the Year

Nomination Information
Do you know a dynamic duo that is as effective in the classroom as Batman and Robin are in fighting crime in Gotham City? Do you know a team as determined as Sherlock Holmes and Doctor Watson? Do you hear the words “we” and “us” when instruction is being provided in the classroom instead of “me” and “you”? Please take the time and nominate this positive instructional relationship for new Paraprofessional/Teacher Instructional Team of the Year award! Please include the following information —

Part 1
1. Name of the Para/Teacher Instructional Team
2. Where employed
3. Work address/phone
4. Number of years employed as a para/teacher
5. Number, type, and age of students/clients served
6. Name of Nominator
7. Nominator’s address/phone

Part 2
1. Write a short paragraph telling how this para/teacher team exhibits a positive, effective working relationship including such qualities as —
   • Clear and open communication
   • Respect for each other and the students with whom they work
   • Shared educational philosophy in children’s ability to learn and succeed
   • Understanding of team role definition and expectations
2. What makes this team unique? What characteristics or qualities set this team apart from the other para/teacher teams?
   • What contributions does this team make to the school/work environment during the work day and beyond?
   • How does this team make a difference in the lives of their students?
3. Include statements of support from students, parents, teachers, administration, and/or peers.

Applications are being accepted until March 31, 2000

Mail or fax this information to —
Anita Cyr, Institute on Community Integration, University of Minnesota, 111 Pattee Hall, 150 Pillsbury Drive SE, Minneapolis, MN 55455, Fax (612) 624-9344.

Tell us about it!
Fax: (612) 624-9344
paralink@icimail.coled.umn.edu
Fostering Independence

I have spent over 10 years as a paraprofessional with high school students with special needs. During my tenure as an assistant, I felt that I was doing my job well when halfway through the quarter, students did not know that I was there to specifically help certain students. However this has not always been the reality. As a paraprofessional, my goal has always been to ensure that each student I work with enjoys the greatest independent success. In other words, my job has been to actually make my job obsolete. I know that I successfully completed my mission when, at the next IEP meeting for one of my students, the team decides that the student no longer needs one-on-one assistance.

Research studies have shown that there is a great impact from the proximity of the paraprofessional to the student with special needs and often times this impact is more negative than positive. When paraprofessionals move from assisting students in tasks that they need help with to making decisions for them, doing tasks that they could learn to do by themselves, and hovering over them, they in fact hinder their educational progress (Giangreco, Edelmann, Luiselli & MacFarland, 1997).

Here are some things to be aware of to foster independence in students.

Know your Role
What is your role? Who is the teacher? When we as paraprofessionals are always there for our students, there is a tendency for the classroom teacher to assume that we have the lessons under control. We must remember that the teacher needs to be teaching every student and every student needs to recognize the teacher as the primary instructor for the class. We need to encourage our students to take their cues directly from the teacher. One mother, when observing her son’s classroom, put it appropriately when she remarked, “She (paraprofessional) doesn’t have to be a part of his wheelchair — I just think that he could break away a little bit (from the paraprofessional) if he was included more in all the activities with the regular classroom teacher.”

Allow for Peer Interactions
What about working with other classmates and group projects? I fear that often, for convenience or safety reasons, we become our students working partners instead of allowing for peer interactions in student groups. Or if we are in a group with other students we are tempted to direct the work in the direction we think that it should go. Or how often do we make our students conspicuous by removing them from group activities in order to fit our own agenda or ease of movement through the halls? As a result, our students miss valuable socialization time that comes with waiting for the bell, passing with their classmates, and interacting with their peers. We must always remember that students without disabilities benefit from interactions with students with disabilities as much as students with disabilities gain from working with their peers without disabilities.

Facilitate Healthy Friendship Development
Does our omnipresence hinder the development of healthy friendships? Let’s face it, a student being assisted by a paraprofessional carries a stigma among students. Students gain a greater sense of “otherness” if a paraprofessional is part of the equation. A special educator quite aptly once remarked, “I’d like to get the paraprofessional away from Holly a little bit more so that her peers will have a chance to get in there and work more with Holly.” Students feel less free or are more intimidated to interact with each other on a personal level if there is an adult or an authority figure around. We can help students learn socialization skills by letting them “be kids” when safety is not an issue.
Increase Self-Reliance
How many times do our stu-
dents take cues only from us
and not from any one else?
How often do we encourage
our students to be more inde-
pendent and less dependent
on us? If we want our stu-
dents to become as indepen-
dent as they can be, we need
to encourage them to do
dings for themselves that
they can and not give them
unneeded attention.

Too often students with dis-
abilities are placed in general
education classrooms without
clear expectations among the
educational team members as
to who will help plan, imple-
ment, monitor, evaluate, and
adjust instruction for them.
This lack of clarity creates an
environment promoting close
proximity between the in-
structional assistant and the
student. In addition, since we
all want to do our job well but
do not have a complete sense
of what our job is, yet we
know that we are supposed to
be helpers, we end up staying
too close to our students. The
result is lack of student inde-
pendence in the long run.

In conclusion, the goal of
the American education sys-
tem has been to help all stu-
dents become responsible
adult citizens. In order to fa-
cilitate this, there needs to be
high standards for all stu-
dents including students with
disabilities when they are in
school. If we as paraprofes-
sionals do not foster indepen-
dence in our students when
they are in school, what is go-
ing to happen to them when
they leave the school system?
We are not going to be there
to prompt them in their every
action. We will not be there to
help them understand what
they can and cannot do for
themselves. As a result they
will not know the extent of
their capabilities and thus
will not be successful as
adults and that will be a great
shame. We must never forget
that the most important as-
pect of our job as paraprofes-
sionals is to challenge all stu-
dents to help themselves and
their peers so that they’re
able to realize their full po-
tential in life.

* Giangreco, M., Edelman, S., Luiselli, T.
& MacFarland, S. (1997). Helping or
hovering? Effects of instructional assis-
tant proximity on students with dis-
abilities. Exceptional Children, 64, 7-18.

Contributed by Chris Harkness,
Paraprofessional, Winona Senior
High, Minnesota Paraprofes-
sional Consortium Member.

Tips For Fostering Independence in Students

• Reinforce the use of appropriate social skills. Model for
students methods of making appropriate choices and making
and maintaining friendships.

• Set similar expectations and standards of effort for your
students as other students their age.

• Let your students know that you have high expectations for
them. Using consistent encouragement, they will have high
expectations for themselves.

• Continually ask yourself, “Am I as far away as I can safely be
in this case and how much of this task can this student do
without my direct assistance?”

• Encourage students to take cues from the person in charge,
whether a teacher, a job supervisor, or a peer group leader.

• Although it is quicker, easier, and less frustrating for the
paraprofessional to do a task, assist students in learning how
to do their own work. We must remember that it is their work.

• Encourage students to assist each other when help is needed.

• Relate to all students as equals.

• Give students choices instead of telling them what to do or
making decisions for them. Allow them time to think. Teach
them how to think.
The Gift of Struggle

Are we stealing from our children? Despite our best intentions, we may be robbing them of the opportunity to struggle, leaving them vulnerable to underachievement and suicide.

Schools today face an epidemic of underachievers, yet these children believe with all their hearts that they are incapable of doing the work asked of them. They say school is boring, irrelevant or too hard. They may seem confused, under constant stress or incapable of doing more.

Well-meaning friends may suggest that parents be more understanding, more supportive or more helpful with studies. Sometimes these tips are helpful, but often they are the worst possible advice.

“Mom and Dad to the rescue.” These same children may have similar problems when it comes to doing tasks at home. They have learned at an early age that adults will rescue them when the going gets tough. Children quickly become addicted to help from adults and begin to believe the adults unstated message that they can succeed only with assistance.

Underachievers often have parents who had to struggle when they were children. They often say, “I don’t want my kids to struggle like I did. They deserve better.” Their children live in a home where struggle is an enemy rather than an opportunity.

The problem was less severe years ago. Parents preoccupied with the Depression, World War II and scratching out a living gave their kids tasks which forced them to help the family. Struggling at home prepared children to struggle at school.

Today’s underachievers believe failure is too painful. Yet recent studies demonstrate children denied the opportunity to struggle during their early years are at high risk for suicide. They are unable to see themselves solving problems.

Solutions: The answer is to give children responsibilities. Children need jobs to do around the house and they need parents who consider this a top priority. The most effective way to do this is to say to your children, “There is no hurry on the chores. I just want them done before your next meal.” Missing a meal is momentarily unpleasant but avoiding a struggle hurts self-concept in the long run.

I was recently asked if chores should be assigned to a teenager who has a lot of studying, many school responsibilities and a part-time job. Teenagers become experts at believing they have more important things to do than chores. They even decide that studying is more important.

My answer was, “Absolutely! Chores come first.” Say to your youngster, “I hope you get your chores done fast enough so the rest of your activities won’t suffer.”

Sylvia B. Rimm, Ph.D., author of the Underachievement Syndrome, says many learning problems at school are cured when children are given chores at home. One of her 12 tips for helping underachievers: “Children feel more tension when they are worrying about their work than when they are doing their work.”


For more information about the Cline-Fay Institute, The Love and Logic People, call 1-800-338-4065.

The Minnesota Paraprofessional Consortium Website address has changed. The new address is http://id2.umn.edu/para. Please update your Web bookmarks!
Workshops

Mark Your Calendars Now for These Spring Conferences

• The 8th Annual Statewide Conference for Paraprofessionals, Hutchinson, Minnesota, May 5–6, 2000. The goal of this conference is to provide paraprofessionals an opportunity to learn about new and different strategies to assist in their jobs and to network with other paraprofessionals. The registration fee has changed this year and is $50 per person which includes refreshments, lunch and materials. By attending this conference, paraprofessionals will earn Continuing Education Units. This conference was initiated by the Minnesota Department of Children, Families, & Learning, and is sponsored by the Institute on Community Integration (UAP) at the University of Minnesota, Ridgewater College, AFSCME, ECSU, MVASNP, MSEA, and Education Minnesota. For more information, you can visit the Minnesota Paraprofessional Consortium Website at http://ici2.umn.edu/para. Registration will begin in January, 2000.

• The 19th National Paraprofessional Conference, Portland, Oregon, April 27–29, 2000. Soon you can visit the Website for further details at web.gc.cuny.edu/dept/case/nrcp/.

• The Council for Exceptional Children’s Annual Convention, Vancouver, B.C., Canada, April 5–8, 2000. Make plans now for the 2000 CEC Convention and Expo. Information regarding convention programming, fees, and registration will be available soon at the CEC Website: www.cec.sped.org contact: CEC, 1920 Association Drive, Reston, VA 20191-1589, (888)232-7733, email: conteduc@cec.sped.org.

Paraphernalia

National Clearinghouse for Professions in Special Education (NCPSE)

This Website on Paraeducators from the Council for Exceptional Children includes the nature of work, education required, personal qualities, job outlook and advancement, how to prepare for a career, related careers, practitioner profile, and resource information for paraeducators.

National Clearinghouse for Professions in Special Education
1920 Association Drive
Reston, VA 20191-1589
(800)641-7824
Email: ncpse@cec.sped.org
Web: www.special-ed-careers.org

National Clearinghouse for Paraeducator Resources (NCPR)

NCPR is committed to providing a comprehensive repository of information, as well as a forum to further the discussion, for achieving the goal of bringing talented paraeducators into the ranks of our nation’s teaching force.

National Clearinghouse for Paraeducator Resources©
Paraeducator Pathways into Teaching
University of Southern California
Rossier School of Education
Waite Phillips Hall
Los Angeles, CA 90089-0031
(213)740 2360
Web: www.usc.edu/dept/education/CMMR/Clearinghouse.html

Paraeducator Pathways into Teaching
National Resource Center

National Resource Center for Paraprofessionals in Education and Related Services - New Co-Directors Named

The National Resource Center for Paraprofessionals in Education and Related Services (NRCP) was founded by Anna Lou Pickett over 20 years ago. The center offers information, resources, training, and technical assistance to teachers, administrators, policymakers, paraprofessionals and others regarding the preparation and employment of paraprofessionals. The center also supports a national newsletter and offers a broad range of support to those working to enhance the preparation and support of the paraprofessional workforce.

Anna Lou recently announced her retirement in December of this year. She also announced that Teri Wallace from the University of Minnesota’s Institute on Community Integration, along with Marilyn Likins of Utah State University, will serve as the Center’s new co-directors.

Teri Wallace began her work in the field of Special Education in a Minnesota community-based paraprofessional position 12 years ago. Since then she has obtained her teaching license, a Masters in Educational Psychology and a Doctorate in Educational Policy and Administration. Teri has worked for 10 years with Barbara Jo Stahl from the Minnesota Department of Children, Families & Learning and Minnesota’s Paraprofessional Consortium to support the state’s paraprofessionals. She has provided leadership in the development of training systems and materials, guiding principles and competencies, and recognition and support structures. Her success and passion in this area is obvious and will bring national recognition to our work in Minnesota. Teri will begin her new role in January, 2000.

When asked about her plans for the center, Teri stated “…we hope to continue the commitment and quality established by Anna Lou Pickett. She is an amazing person who has given personal and professional energy to this initiative for much of her career. I am honored to work with her.” The first bit of business is the coordination of next year’s national paraprofessional conference. According to Teri “…the conference will be held in Portland, Oregon on April 27, 28, and 29. This is a beautiful place to learn something new, meet old and new friends, and enjoy the scenery — I hope that you will join us.”

To learn more about the NRCP, please visit the Website at: web.gc.cuny.edu/dept/case/nrcp/.

Call for Presentations

A Critical Link
Each year, the Minnesota Statewide Paraprofessional Conference is attended by 500 participants. This includes paraprofessionals and those who support their work.

Who Can Present?
The Minnesota Statewide Paraprofessional Consortium is seeking presenters to share strategies/insights which will help prepare paraprofessionals and those who support them to provide quality services to students in the new millennium. Send in your proposal today! (Presenters will receive a $25 stipend plus a mileage reimbursement.)

Dates and Locations
This conference will be held on May 5 – 6, 2000 (Friday evening and Saturday) at Ridgewater College in Hutchinson, Minnesota, which is approximately one hour west of Minneapolis.

Conference Structure
There will be two general sessions for all participants and various presentation sessions of which participants can choose to attend. The presentations are approximately 50 minutes, and will be on both Friday evening and Saturday.

The conference is initiated by the Minnesota Department of Children, Families and Learning, and sponsored by professionals and paraprofessionals from Ridgewater College, Institute on Community Integration (UAP) at the University of Minnesota, AFSCME, ECSU, MVASNP, MSEA, and Education Minnesota.
...A Critical Link Call for Presentations

Title of presentation
as it will appear in the conference program

Intended audience

- Paraprofessionals/ Aides/ Assistants/ Direct
- Service Staff
- Teachers
- Administrators
- Parents
- Other ______________________________

Brief description of content
Limit to 100 words. Please note: Please make sure that you state the title and the objectives of the presentation. This is the description that will be printed in the program.

Audio/visual equipment
Please check which A/V equipment you will need —
- Overhead projector
- Flipchart or Chalkboard
- VCR and Monitor
- Slide projector
- Other ______________________________

Selection process
Presentation will be scheduled on the basis of relevance to the conference target audience and balance of topics for the indicated tracks. You will be informed of your status by March 1, 2000.

Proposals must be submitted by

February 15, 2000

Thank you for your interest
Ehrenberg doesn’t know what happened to the macramé that she encouraged another student to create. Aware of his eye sight problems, she figured he would excel if he could use his sense of touch instead. She does know what happened to the project of another student, however. The youngster quickly picked up on the importance of reading when he realized knowing the measurements for making pudding came down to following a recipe. The proud chef loved the stuff, and didn’t mind sharing it with others, either.

Ehrenberg refuses to take the credit herself for any of these accomplishments. The success she’s seen at the school is a credit to all of those around her, she insists. It takes a team effort of parents, teacher, and paraprofessional to achieve the best results, she said. No one is better than those around them, according to Ehrenberg. “It’s all those who you’re with. They make you grow, too,” she said. She has the good fortune of being around people who naturally lift the bar, she explained.

Ehrenberg sees other reasons for the success around her, too. The small school has the advantage of being able to take a personal approach to helping students. It’s also fortunate enough to have Principal Al Stoeckman, who knows how to let staff members do what they do best, she said. When it came to Ehrenberg, the person who happened to know her potential best of all was Renee Tostenson, a kindergarten teacher in the Appleton School. That was over 13 years ago, when Ehrenberg volunteered to help in the class as her youngest daughter began her school years. Tostenson recognized Ehrenberg’s talents, and urged her to apply for a paraprofessional position that opened in the district.

She did, and 13 years ago she began helping an extremely shy child with Down’s Syndrome as he made his way through the grades. She followed the student to Milan Elementary seven years ago, where they’ve known better than to let her go. The student, Travis Runia, has since moved on, but he returned for the award ceremony in Ehrenberg’s honor. Runia never blinked an eye as he calmly walked in front of student-packed bleachers and expressed his gratitude to her. Other students did so too, but this audience already knew much of what Ehrenberg had accomplished.

What they didn’t always know was this: The paraprofessional who arrives every day with a smile to help others hasn’t been without her own challenges in life. This has hardly been a lucrative year for her husband Richard’s hog operation near Correll. Nor has it been an easy year for other reasons. Their barn caught fire. One of her parents, as well as one of her husband’s parents, have dealt with health problems. Add to that, the changes that come with watching the youngest child leave home for college. None of this was mentioned by Ehrenberg, who preferred to talk about her surprise that people would put so much effort into honoring her for doing what she loves to do.

Contributed by Tom Cherveny, staff writer, West Central Tribune, Willmar, Minnesota.
1999 Para of the Year Nominees

The Minnesota Paraprofessional Consortium would like to recognize all of the 1999 nominees for Paraprofessional of the Year. All the nominees are extremely valuable to the success of the students and schools of Minnesota. The dedication, commitment, and determination of these paraprofessionals help make the process of education the very best it can be. Thank you to all of them!

Rebecca Beaudette
Cindy Brose
Deb Graham Edmondson
Deb Hildebrand
Rob Hoppe
Denise Hukreide
Shari Mason
— Phase North, Crystal

Sharon Buntin
Jennifer Crump
— Tanglen Elementary School, Minnetonka

Arnette Schwimmer
Lori Jacobson
Cindy Stegman
— Forest Elementary, Crystal

Linda Ehrenberg
— Milan Elementary School, Milan

Betsy Fiksdahl
— Gage East Elementary, Rochester

Betty Gonnerman
— ACGC South Elementary, Cosmos

Bonnie Lotzer
— Delano High School, Delano

Wanda Marquardt
— Grant Language Magnet School, Duluth

Peggy Miller
— Noble Elementary School, Golden Valley

Genrose Pendergast
— Community Based PSD, St. Paul

Diana Vogt
— Willow Creek Middle School, Rochester