

Making new friends every day

Career Quest helps local man find the workplace that's just right for him

By SUZANNE MARINO
Staff Writer

EGG HARBOR TOWNSHIP – Matthew Roman of Ventnor is one of the more familiar faces around the Shore Mall. He has worked there for the better part of the last 11 years – first at Auntie Anne's Pretzels and now the Children's Museum – and he has amassed more friends than many people do in a lifetime.

That might be simply because Roman never met a person he didn't like. He greets visitors with a quick smile and a firm handshake that show how happy he is in his surroundings.

Roman, 37, who has Down syndrome, is a client of Career Quest, an arm of Community Quest Inc. of Egg Harbor Township that helps place the disabled in jobs. Formerly the Disabilities Resource Center, Community Quest's mission is to help people with disabilities achieve their goals, gain independence through employment, and in some cases find residences in the community.

With assistance from Career Quest's supported employment job coach Alan Cassett, Roman has found his niche at the Children's Museum.

He works two hours a day three or four days a week as the museum's exhibit manager. His job is to make sure that all the displays throughout the museum are tidy and ready for the children to explore.

Roman says he loves his job, and it shows.

"Matt is very responsible and he

keeps us all smiling whenever he is here," said Sue Guenther, his supervisor at the museum.

"When Alan approached me and suggested we hire Matthew, there was a little hesitation. We weren't exactly sure how it would all work out. We never hired a disabled person here at the museum," Guenther said.

"But once Matt got here, we knew it would be fine. "He is a very good worker and a pleasure to have."

Roman graduated from Special Services High School in Mays Landing, where he participated in a prevocational program that helped prepare him for job placement after graduation, according to his mother, Carol Roman.

Cassett did more than find job placement for Roman; he helped him get acclimated to his new daily routine. He continues to guide him through the obstacles and challenges of the workplace as Roman achieves greater independence and earns money.

Roman takes part in bimonthly workshops with other Career Quest clients who are successfully employed, and his mother said he has developed friendships and enjoys sharing details about his job.

As Roman gave a visitor the grand tour of the museum, a league of supporters – his family – was waiting. Present were his two brothers, John and Greg, sister-in-law Dana, nephews Connor and Gregory, and his mother.

Matthew Roman was the center of attention as he introduced them.

"This is my brother John," he said. "He lives in Reading and is a good attorney. He is my attorney. And this is



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Matthew Roman and his job coach, Alan Cassett of Career Quest, are at the Children's Museum at the Shore Mall, where Cassett helped Roman find a job that he enjoys.

my brother Greg, and he is a great football coach for the Baltimore Ravens. And this is my mother. She is a great school teacher."

As the joking and good-natured ribbing carried on, the family made it clear that what was important was that Matthew knew just how proud they all were of him and how far he had come.

Carol Roman said that working at the museum is very important to her son.

"I wanted to make plans to go away for a few days, and I have to work around Matt's schedule. He tells me he has to be at work," she said. His self-confidence is a result of his successful placement in a job he enjoys and working

with people who enjoy him as well, she said.

The Roman family is being honored by Community Quest at its Laureate Awards dinner Feb. 7 at the Ram's Head Inn with the salute to family award.

Richard W. West of Tuckerton, who has been an advocate for people with disabilities since he was diagnosed with limb-girdle muscular dystrophy in 1981, will be honored for his ongoing work for the disabled. He is the chairman of the New Jersey Protection and Advocacy Governing Board and is responsible for opening Able West Inc., a company to support education, community inclusion and assistive technology for

people with disabilities.

West is the organizer of the annual offshore fishing trip for the disabled and established the Long Beach Island five-mile wheelchair race held in Manahawkin each May.

Also being honored will be Thomas Messina of Mullica for his eight years as a volunteer with the Good Neighbor Golf Committee. Speaking at the dinner will be Pete Dougherty, director of the homeless veterans program in Washington, D.C.

Tickets for the dinner are \$90. Proceeds benefit Community Quest Inc. programs. For information or tickets call (609) 646-0388 or visit www.CQInc.org and register online.