Derek West, who is 26 years old and diagnosed on the autism spectrum, says he got the idea that he wanted to have a career as a cashier from going to the grocery store. “I got to meet the cashiers, and they were good at counting money, and so am I,” he explains. What’s making his pursuit of this goal possible is help from human services agency Becoming Independent (BI) and its Passport to Independence program. Based in Santa Rosa, BI was founded 50 years ago by parents who banded together to ensure that their children with developmental or intellectual disabilities wouldn’t miss out on the opportunity to live meaningful and productive lives.

All BI services are designed to elevate human abilities for the mutual benefit of the whole community. Innovative programs offered by BI for adults aged 18 and up encompass vocational training and employment, independent living supports, and continuing education, all aimed at maximum integration into and engagement with their community. They also offer a professional art program that encourages participants to explore and develop their personal creativity and provides artists with inspiration, instruction, and opportunities for exhibitions and sales.

Passport to Independence (PTI) is a specialized program within the larger service offering aimed at meeting the needs of adults with high-functioning autism spectrum disorder or characteristics by facilitating the development of skills needed to be active members of the community. In Derek’s case, the curriculum has helped him develop greater patience and flexibility and identify strategies and tools for self-regulation and anxiety reduction. But PTI Program Coordinator Juliana Baumgartner emphasizes that the services are not attending to symptoms of autism: “We are really looking at how to enhance one person’s ability to become who they want to be.”

BI partners with local businesses to provide opportunities for participants to gain work experience relevant to their particular career ambitions. Since Derek wants to be a cashier, he is receiving on-the-job training by volunteering at ReStyle Marketplace, a local thrift store. Juliana notes that there is often a misperception that people
Derek West is a graduate of Becoming Independent’s Passport to Independence Program.

on the spectrum don’t enjoy social interaction. But that’s certainly not true for Derek, who really likes interacting with customers at ReStyle, where he is the first and last point of contact for customers. Store Manager Karlos Silva says people who come in to shop appreciate Derek’s presence at the register and enthusiasm for the job – and that’s good for his business. Restyle has worked with BI for five years offering work experience opportunities to program participants, but this is the first time someone has taken on the cash register there, with staff from BI acting as onsite coaches during this training period. “Yep, I’m a cashier,” Derek says. “Now I’m learning how to sell products and greet customers!” Karlos is impressed with Derek’s focus as he works the register and deals with customers. “He’s very good at counting back money and balancing the till at the end of each shift, down to the penny,” Karlos says. The greater patience and flexibility he’s learned through PTI is also paying off. “He’s a leader, even his BI coaches look to him when things get hectic,” notes Karlos.

“With person-centered employment, everyone starts at a different place, it’s not a straight line.”
Angela Grech, Fund Development Manager

BI is a pioneer in breaking barriers with innovative programs and services that strive for maximum integration and engagement with the community. In the area of vocational training and employment services, the nonprofit is in the midst of a transition, mandated by the federal government, from a traditional congregate employment model primarily centered around a sheltered workshop and group employment to a more fully inclusive model of community-based employment. That means preparing people to be part of the competitive job market or one of the organization’s social enterprises.

“We have long seen the wisdom and value of it, now the government is mandating it,” says Lisa Folsom-Ernst, Fund Development Director. But as often happens, there was no government funding that came along with the mandate. “So we are left to come up with creative solutions for moving people away from widget manufacturing and towards a job at Mary’s Pizza Shack, for example.”
To fully make the shift, BI needed funding to build capacity, first to be able to provide more individualized vocational services based on a deep understanding of each person’s interests, skills and abilities, talents, and aspirations, and then to reach out to employers to find a match.

BI has a legacy relationship with Exchange Bank, a local bank with a storied history of support for the Santa Rosa community, that has long been a strong partner for BI and a regular financial sponsor of BI events. “Their mission resonates with needs of the community,” says Ann Hudson, Senior Vice President at the Exchange Bank and a member of BI’s board. “What they are doing resonates also with me personally, too, as I see the challenges people I know are facing as their children with special needs grow into adulthood,” she adds. “I look at the people who do the work there and I think what can I do to help them keep doing what they are doing, using my skills and connections in the community and other resources?”

As a member of the Federal Home Loan Bank of San Francisco, Exchange Bank was able to further support BI by tapping into the Bank’s AHEAD program, which provides grants for innovative economic development initiatives. BI partnered with Exchange Bank to apply for a grant that could help them build greater internal capacity for more-targeted vocational guidance and training for more participants and for outreach to potential employment partners.

“The $43,000 AHEAD grant is playing an instrumental role in helping build skills and capacity among our staff so that employment outcomes are significantly increased for the people we serve,” says Luana Vaetoe, CEO of Becoming Independent. “It’s an investment that promises to have a big impact, and we are grateful to Exchange Bank for their support of our application.”

AHEAD funds are being used to develop in-house expertise in disability-inclusive workforce expansion, and for marketing to a large pool of potential employers in the greater North Bay. “When potential employers get to know us, they see us as a qualified and capable workforce, eager to work,” says Paula Finley, Director of Employment Services. One of the organization’s social enterprises, an onsite shredding business, currently has 100 business customers and is expanding into mobile shredding services.

“In the past, people would come in for our day program and we would have X, Y, and Z jobs, so we’d say to them, which one do you fit?” says Paula. AHEAD funding is enabling BI staff to provide individualized employment services to more clients, helping people to identify their career goals, develop relevant skills, and build a resume, and then reaching out to employers to connect them with a suitable opportunity, one that further connects the individual to

“It is a boost to the local economy to have these people with disabilities earning their own money. When they get a paycheck, for the most part they are spending it locally.”

Lisa Folsom-Ernst, Director of Fund Development
the community. “Everybody can do something, and there’s a job for everyone – when we can make a good match between the person and the employer, that’s when we do our happy dance.”

Along with each individual success, the broader community also sees an economic benefit. “Most of the clients BI serves are low-income people living on SSI,” says Lisa. “It’s a boost to the local economy to have these people with disabilities earning their own money. When they get a paycheck, for the most part they are spending it locally.” A paycheck is also an important rite of passage for many people. While Derek is not yet on the ReStyle payroll because he is still in training, he also has a paying job doing restaurant prep work at Mary’s Pizza Shack several mornings a week.

Derek enjoys shopping at local comic and video game stores and for baseball cards and memorabilia, but he’s good at saving money, too. “Three years ago I saved up enough money for me and my dad to go to Orlando, Florida, to Disney World.” Looking forward to his future in a paid cashier position, Derek says, “Hopefully I’ll earn big money, but who knows? It would be interesting to make enough money to go to Disney World again, and bring the whole family with me to check out all the attractions we went on.”

“When potential employers get to know us, they see us as a qualified and capable workforce, eager to work.”

Paula Finley, Director of Employment Services

The staff at BI are passionate about the work they do. “I’m constantly humbled by the resiliency and abilities of the people we serve, and what they are able to achieve,” says Angela Grech, Fund Development Manager. Paula agrees that it’s awesome to feel the excitement that participants bring to the program each day. “I find it an elixir,” says Lisa. “There’s a lot of soul and authentic human connection happening here.”

But there’s nothing that beats having Derek himself state how he feels about what he’s learned at BI and how far he has come on his career path. “I feel proud of myself,” he says with confidence. But there’s nothing that beats having Derek himself state how he feels about what he’s learned at BI and how far he has come on his career path. “I feel proud of myself,” he says with confidence.