

THE Importance of Caring

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my journey into health care



Barbara Olnes

PROJECT SEARCH SKILLS TRAINER

Barbara Olnes has a passion for helping others, that's why as a child, she knew she wanted to work in health care or education.

She ended up finding a career that has allowed her to do both.

Olnes is now a Project SEARCH skills trainer at Columbus Community Hospital. But before taking this job, Olnes had worked in a different health care field.

In 2007, Olnes's hometown was in need of emergency medical technicians (EMTs), so she volunteered to be on the local rescue squad and became an EMT. Two years later, Olnes moved to Alaska to get a degree in paramedic technology from the University of Alaska Anchorage-Kenai Peninsula College.

After working as a full-time paramedic, Olnes left the job to look for a position that was more family-friendly. She took a job at a school district and in 2017 she started working for Project SEARCH at CCH. In late 2018, she returned to college to work towards a special education degree.

The Project SEARCH program is for young adults with special needs between the ages of 18-21 who are in their last year of eligibility in school. These young adults work as interns at CCH while they receive education in the Project SEARCH classroom.

As a team, the Project SEARCH instructor, speech/language pathologist, and Olnes teach the interns a curriculum that includes lessons on team building, workplace safety, technology, gaining and maintaining employment, self-advocacy, financial literacy, and health and wellness.

"We prepare the interns to be successful working citizens within their communities," Olnes said.

Part of that preparation includes the interns working at least three different rotations at CCH throughout the program year. As a skills trainer, part of Olnes' job is to provide additional education or training to an intern, if needed during their rotation.

"Sometimes an intern struggles with a task or a concept when working in a department," Olnes said. **"When needed, I come into the department to observe the intern and come up with a way to help them overcome the issue at hand."**

Olnes also observes the interns and creates progress notes for the interns' schools, arranges field trips and activities for the interns in the community, organizes events, and assists the Project SEARCH instructor during classroom time.

In general, Olnes works with parents, school districts, hospital staff and the rest of the Project SEARCH team to ensure the

program runs smoothly. She said this work is made easier by the team at CCH, which she said has done an amazing job of hosting the program.

"The staff is easy to get along with and are willing to go the extra mile to get me what I need in order to create a successful program for our interns," she said. **"The departments are willing to take our interns under their wings and help them learn the skills needed to be successful in future jobs and life."**

Olnes said that more and more CCH departments are becoming open to hosting interns which is exciting because it allows more flexibility for the program and interns.

The Project SEARCH interns have a variety of opportunities at CCH in part because the health care field itself is so varied. This is one of the things Olnes enjoys about working in the field.

"Many people think of patient care when they think of health care. In reality, it is much more than that," she said. **"There are so many different jobs within the health care system - each an important piece of the whole puzzle."**

For more information on Olnes or the Project SEARCH, visit columbushosp.org.