

At Mobius, Inc., Class is in Session

By Ellen C. Lamb

Education and training for their clients is a core mission at Mobius, Inc., a Damariscotta-based nonprofit organization that serves people with disabilities. Over the past year, however, the organization has broadened its commitment to recognize that advanced education is just as important for the people Mobius employs.

Mobius, which employs a full-time equivalent of 125 people, has always been a good place to work, says David Lawlor, its Executive Director. But he jumped at the opportunity when he heard about the Maine Lifelong Learning Accounts (LiLA) program, an initiative sponsored by the Maine Department of Labor (in partnership with FAME and others) that promotes employer-matched individual college savings accounts and makes educational counseling available to employees of participating companies.

“In this field, resources are tight,” he says. “I always wanted to do something for employees who showed interest [in continuing education] . . . but it was always difficult to justify the expense.” Mobius launched its LiLA program in the autumn of 2009, and Lawlor is surprised — but very pleased — at how fast it’s taken off. “We ramped this up pretty quick, and were really struck by the number of people who jumped on board.” Nine or ten staff members are already participating, and Mobius’ program has been recognized as a model by the Maine Employers’ Initiative, as an example of “one more step” Maine businesses can take to encourage their employees’ educational advancement.

The program has already delivered tangible benefits to Jennifer Oliver, a Person-Centered

Plan Coordinator, and Cheryl Achorn, who started as a direct support provider at Mobius but is now a Finance Specialist. In May of this year, Oliver completed her B.A. in psychology from Southern New Hampshire University (SNHU), while Achorn earned an associate’s degree in mental health and human services from the University of Maine at Augusta.

While both women started their college work before Mobius joined the LiLA program, they say the direct and indirect support from their employer has been invaluable. Mobius matches up to \$300/year in tuition costs, while the Finance Authority of Maine/NextGen, sponsor of the savings account, contributes up to \$200/year. Last year, employees were also able to take advantage of a short-term Department of Labor program that offered initial grants of up to \$1,000. Beyond that, Mobius has a fairly generous earned-time program, which is flexible enough to allow employees to use personal time for education.

“It’s great if you have a workplace that is very supportive of going back to school,” Achorn says. “If I needed to miss work before I had a test or whatever, David [Lawlor] was great.” Oliver has not yet had to take advantage of Mobius’ flextime policy, but she will: she has already started work toward a master’s in Community Mental Health from SHNU, a program that will require three internships.

Juggling work with education is a challenge, but worth the effort, Achorn and Oliver agree. Ten years elapsed between Cheryl Achorn’s first college class and the completion of her degree. “It took me a while,” she says. “Because I had been out of school for so long, I had forgotten about how much studying goes with it, and how to juggle things. The amount of work was a surprise.” Oliver says that returning to school has taught her “discipline and time management.” When she joined Mobius in

early 2009, she carried a full course load as well as working full-time, looking after her elderly mother, and babysitting her grandchildren. “You find the time,” she says.

For both women, education has opened paths to new career choices. Eight years ago, Jennifer Oliver returned to the workforce under stressful circumstances, after the end of a 27-year marriage; her first job was as a direct service provider at NFI North’s Weymouth House in Newcastle, a residential facility for at-risk youth. Now, having earned not only her bachelor’s degree but certifications as a Direct Service Provider and a Certified Residential Medication Aide as well, she looks forward to her ultimate goal: becoming a Licensed Clinical Professional Counselor.

Achorn, who credits her disabled brother for her lifelong interest in issues surrounding mental health and human services, learned that direct support was not the only career

path available for her in the field. The classes at UMA “gave me new insights” into both her brother and her work. “I learned things I never knew before,” and discovered new interests and skills. “In the fall, I’m going to take a couple of accounting classes,” she says. “And who knows — maybe down the road a few years, I might decide to go for my bachelor’s.”

This is exactly what David Lawlor was hoping for when he made the decision for Mobius to participate in the LiLA program. The visible benefits of outside education have surprised even him, he says. “There’s no substitute for what fundamental education can provide people. It gives people a broader view of the world, so that the issues people raise are not so parochial.

“The way that technology is evolving, what you learned five years ago may not be relevant,” he concludes. “But in terms of management, a foundational education is invaluable.”