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A part of the family Chili's employee makes strides in personal life

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Anna Paradise meticulously adjusts the menus in a holder during work on Aug. 16. Paradise has Down syndrome and with support from Sycamore Services, has achieved her goals of having a job and living independently in her own apartment. Photo by Andrew Crowley.

MARTINSVILLE

In two years at Chili's, Anna Paradise has never once broken a dish. That's pretty unheard of in the restaurant world where shattered glasses and broken dishware are just a reality of the business.

Even Amber Arthur, the general manager of the Chili's in Martinsville where Paradise works, sometimes breaks dishes.

"She has not broken a single dish, probably the only employee that has not broken a single dish," Arthur said "And she is like very, very proud of that. I told her, 'Even if you do, it's fine, it happens,' but she has not broken a single one."

Along with bussing, Paradise has been employee of the month and recently had taken on some hosting duties.

“She’s done a great job at both. Good with direction, good with team members. She’s part of our family, that’s for sure,” Arthur said. “Customers love her, love having her here. She’s an excellent busser; she does a great job.”

When Paradise began working at Chili’s on May 11, 2016, she was nervous about approaching customers to ask them if she could clear some of their plates.

“I was pretty scared at first of speaking up and [saying] like, ‘Can I take this? Or that?’” Paradise said.

When four or five tables would get up at once, it used to overwhelm her, but now she’s unfazed. She’s so good at her job that she now works Thursday and Friday, two of the busiest times for the restaurant during the day.

She’s been able to achieve her two goals: having a job and living independently with the support of Sycamore Services, an organization that helps individuals with intellectual, developmental and physical disabilities. Individuals like Paradise, who has Down syndrome.

“One thing I don’t like is when somebody calls me disabled, it makes uncomfortable,” Paradise said.

She has received services from Sycamore for the last eight to years, according to Aimee Ketterer, Director of Community Relations and Business Solutions for Sycamore.

“She’s gone through day and community services to help with social skills and get over being so shy,” Ketterer said.

Two years ago, Paradise started working with Sycamore’s employment services to work on her job skills and to land her first job. When she learned she got the job, Paradise was elated. Veronica Romero, who serves as Paradise’s job coach remembers the day well.

“I remember exactly what she did when she got this job, because I was at day service,” Romero said. “She walks in the doorway ‘I got the job!’ arms up in the air.”

Paradise said that she wore a jacket over her work clothes to keep it a surprise. When she was introduced and the staff was informed that she got the job, Paradise showed off her work clothes and went around hugging the staff.

She had similar feelings her first day on the job.

“I was so excited then, I was like, ‘Oh my gosh, I’m so nervous.’ When I talked to the customers, it’s like ‘Oh my gosh’ it’s like ‘Here come the people, here come the people,’ and then I’d freak out about it,” Paradise said.

Paradise has only grown in confidence and self-assuredness.

“I feel like since the time she started working here to now, I’ve seen the improvement in just her personality, also in her being more independent. Before I felt like she was a little nervous to be here on her own, she always wanted Victoria [Romero] here,” Arthur said. “She didn’t feel like she could do it, and now, with encouragement from the team and everybody, she does it just fine.

“I haven’t heard you ask for your job coach in forever,” she said, turning to Paradise, “because you don’t need it, because you do it just fine on your own.”

Romero still meets with Paradise once a week to check up on her.

"I just come in while she's working, see how things are going, talk to the supervisor, make sure everybody is happy and everything's going smooth. With Anna, it's always going well," Romero said.

Initially, Arthur was worried how other employees might treat Paradise, but fortunately her fears were premature.

"Everybody has really taken her in. I was a little nervous at first, and I told everybody, whenever Colin [another individual working with Sycamore] came on as well, 'If anybody does anything to hurt either of those kids, you're done,'" Arthur said.

Paradise has developed relationships with her coworkers outside of the restaurant. A coworker came over to Paradise's apartment to help decorate it after she moved into it in May. She also has developed a special relationship with Arthur. They went to see Lady Antebellum and a performance of "Beautiful: The Carole King Musical." After the performance, Arthur gave Paradise a pedicure.

"It was awesome," Arthur said. "It was my first play I've ever been to."

Paradise, on the other hand, is a big fan of Broadway musicals.

"One thing I'm dying to see is 'Bring It On.' I got the music on my phone," Paradise said.

In September, Arthur and Paradise will see "The Lion King" at the Murat Theater.

"My mom had mentioned it and I said, 'Well if we go, we have to take Anna,' and I was like, 'I'm going to be like popping out there at that time,' that was a couple months ago, now I'm like there, so," Arthur said.

Arthur is currently pregnant and will give birth soon.

"She (Paradise) bought me some burp cloths," Arthur said. "She was the first person that got me anything."

Things are going very well for Paradise, she does her own cooking, cleaning and laundry. She's still learning how to balance her budget and rent, but she is really making strides.

"I got a boyfriend, a job and now I got an apartment," Paradise said. "I feel great."

For more information about Sycamore Services, visit SycamoreServices.com or call 765-342-2476.

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