

MACOMB DAILY

Special Tree cares for its patients and its employees

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Dec 21, 2018



Matt Oberdier is a digital marketing specialist for Special Tree Rehabilitation and that position has him sitting at a desk developing strategies and online content that promotes the company's work as a brain and spinal cord rehabilitation-provider for Macomb and Oakland counties.

His boss, however, encourages his employees to take regular time out for physical and emotional renewal. So, there are times during the workday when he can be found sitting in the greenhouse painting a tree or taking a gardening class.

“I feel lucky to work for a company that prioritizes personnel enrichment,” said Oberdier, who is one of almost 700 people employed by Special Tree, which has earned awards for its employee development programs that not only make Special Tree a great place to work but enrich people's lives.

“The same services that we offer for our clients also benefit our employees,” said Kate McClain, Special Tree’s director of workforce engagement.

The Special Tree was founded in 1974 and in addition to being recognized as one of the earliest independent rehabilitation providers for brain injury in the country has become one of the Midwest’s leading neurorehabilitation providers for adults and children, who have experienced brain and spinal cord injuries, and multiple trauma. Such care not only requires qualified professionals but healthy, happy and patient professionals.

Burnout and other stress-compounded mental health issues are a major problem in the medical field. In fact, approximately 63 percent of people working in physical medicine and rehabilitation experienced at least one sign of burnout in the previous year, according to a study by the Mayo Clinic in 2015.

Helping to combat the trend in the industry is the company’s policy that all employees annually engage in 15 hours of personnel training and enrichment.

“It’s a break from the stress. It’s rebooted Zen. We get to unwind and relax, doing something different and fun,” said Jessica Hilberath, who works for Special Tree’s day treatment team.

Grace DeMuch agrees.

“I love working with patients,” said the recreational therapist. “But it’s nice to have a chance to take time out and catch my breath.”

In the art therapy for stress class, taught by a behavior specialist and licensed art therapist, students explore ways to release tension by sharing their feelings through art. A recent example had participants decorating boxes with words and images reflecting positive traits more heavily than negative ones.

“Going through the positive traits got me,” DeMuch recalled. “I remembered that I have all of these positive qualities. I feel like, going through life. I sometimes shut down both the positive and the negative.”

The classes are also conversational. One day the instructor might be talking about meditation and paint strokes, another day participants are sharing stories about motherhood and the importance of work-life balance.

Basically, the programs provided to employees become special times at Special Tree.

“I get to learn new skills, see old friends, and make new ones,” said Melissa McIntosh, assistant case manager for Special Tree.

“It’s always been this way,” said McClain, adding that in addition to the enrichment programs, employees are treated to holiday gatherings and profit sharing. “Our CEO Joe Richert really invests in the development of people, whether it’s patients for his employees.”

Special Tree provides a variety of services to adults and children in Macomb, Oakland and Wayne counties including subacute treatment with specialized 24-hour nursing and respiratory care, residential services, supported living apartments, comprehensive outpatient services, vocational rehabilitation, along with home and community programs. For more information and locations visit specialtree.com.