

Young man gets dream job as Albertsons bagger

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MISSION VIEJO – For the past decade, Robby Cochran's dream job has been to work as a bagger at the Albertsons by his house.

Each time he accompanied his parents to the grocery store in Mission Viejo, he would straighten items on the store shelves, ask to bag the family's groceries at the checkout stand, and sometimes try to help other customers with their groceries, said his mother, Gail Cochran.

"This was all he ever wanted to do," she said.

But Robby Cochran's parents and teachers knew getting a job at Albertsons was a longshot – the store did not have a job-placement relationship with the Saddleback Valley Unified School District's special education department, and Cochran, a 22-year-old with Down syndrome, would need a job coach to successfully transition into the role.

As he approached the end of his schooling last year, Cochran took various unpaid job assignments, including at Dollar Tree, Fresh & Easy, Big Lots, Walmart and a senior center. But he never wavered in his dream to work at the Albertsons by his house.

In November, the Register featured Cochran and his teacher, Barbara Schulman, in a story about how Schulman served as both Cochran's first teacher as a toddler and his last teacher at age 21 – essentially, a happy coincidence.

An Albertsons district manager in Orange County, Russ Pond, saw that article and passed it to his colleague Suzie Citizen, the district manager in Cochran's area, who promptly passed it to store manager Amanda Woods.

[\(Click here to read the Register story that served as the catalyst for Robby Cochran getting his dream job.\)](#)

Before she even met Cochran, Woods said she had a good feeling about the young man. After the holidays, she said, she contacted him and invited him to interview for a part-time position at her store.

"I read the story and immediately said, 'I'm going to hire him,'" said Woods, now store manager at the Trabuco Canyon Albertsons. "It's not often you get to make someone's dream come true at the grocery store. We look for people like Robby – you have to be passionate about working in retail. We can teach anyone how to do this job."

Full-fledged associate

Cochran began his job in late January under the supervision of job coach Veronica Gurrola of Goodwill Industries of Orange County, which offers job coaching and placement services for individuals with special needs.

Today, Cochran is a full-fledged, hourly associate. He wears an Albertsons uniform like everyone else, punches a timecard in and out everyday, has his own locker in the breakroom and pays dues to his union, the United Food and Commercial Workers.

He is responsible for a host of rotating duties daily, including sweeping the floors, cleaning restrooms and cash registers, retrieving shopping carts from the parking lot and of course his favorite – bagging groceries.

"I love it!" Robby Cochran said with a huge smile. "I love being a bagboy."

Standing at a checkout line on a recent weekday afternoon, Cochran not only has learned to follow basic grocery-bagging techniques (double-bagging heavy bottles, heavy items in first), but he also remembers to greet his customers: "Welcome to Albertsons" and "You have a nice day."

"Once these kids find something they like, they will do that job for life – and once they learn it, they will do it perfectly every time," Schulman said.

Cochran, who wears a bright yellow reflective safety vest, also makes routine trips to the parking lot – potentially the most dangerous part of the job.

But his job coach has trained him to look both ways every time he steps off the sidewalk, and store employees report he's doing just fine. In fact, in recent weeks, Gurrola has been coming to the store less frequently and staying for shorter time spans, his mother said.

"He is just so excited," Gail Cochran said. "He has never been so happy. On Saturdays, he says, 'Only two more days 'til I get to go back to work.'"

Finding a realistic job goal

As a child, Robby Cochran dreamed of being a firefighter. But Schulman, who also was his teacher in middle school, told his parents they needed to help their son develop a more realistic goal.

"Barb said, 'Stop that! He can't be a firefighter,'" Gail Cochran said. "One day, I was at the store with Robby – he was about 11 or 12 – and all of a sudden, he turns around and says to me, 'Mom, could I work at a grocery store?'"

Gail Cochran said her goal is for her son to keep the Albertsons job for his entire life. Eventually, he will qualify for health insurance and his parents hope he can become financially independent enough to move out, perhaps to a group home.

Robby Cochran already takes public buses by himself and knows how to read a bus schedule, and with his Albertsons income he has been able to pay rent to his parents, pay his cell phone bill, and pay for his own clothes and entertainment, including going to the movies and out to eat.

After he got his second paycheck, he asked Schulman out to dinner at his favorite restaurant, Flamingos Mexican Grill & Bar in Laguna Hills. He sat at the head of the table and paid the entire bill for his parents, his teacher and her son, Todd, who once baby-sat him.

"He said I could order anything I wanted," Schulman said. "At the end of the meal, he whipped out his \$20 bills – oh my goodness, it was so cute!"