

Chance for work brings new outlook for Petaluma woman

Developmentally disabled advocate proud of her new job

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JOHN BURGESS / The Press Democrat
Cindy White and her grandson, Conrad, 3, shake a few presents under the tree in their Petaluma home on Christmas Eve.

Cindy White and her family in Petaluma will open presents this morning, then sit down to a holiday feast like many other folks in the North Bay and around the nation.

They also are celebrating a life-changing event that occurred about two months ago when Cindy, a 52-year-old grandmother with a learning disability, got a state job.

"It's a great gift," White said Wednesday, seated at the dining table in her home at the south end of Petaluma, watching her rambunctious 3-year-old grandson, Conrad, play with toys.

Icicle lights line the outside facade, and family photos crowd the walls inside.

Her mother, Martha Hagemeyer, 88, watches television in the living room, where a brightly lit Christmas tree stands.

"I always wanted to get out of the system," said White, who wears glasses and long, straight dark brown hair.

By that she means the network of services that assist and employ developmentally disabled adults, and the Supplemental Security Income payments she has received from the government.

White's new job, as an office clerk at Sonoma Developmental Center, pays about \$2,000 a month -- nearly three times her SSI allotment.

"My first real job," she said.

White starts work on Jan. 2 at Impressions, a clothing shop that serves residents at Sonoma Developmental Center in Eldridge, home to about 680 disabled people.

With help from Becoming Independent, a Santa Rosa-based nonprofit serving the developmentally disabled, White prepared her application and interviewed for the job in November.

Teresa Murphy, an administrator at the Sonoma facility, said White's interview was among the highlights of her 33-year career. "She was a candidate anyone would be proud to hire," Murphy said.

Carin Lawrence, director of services at Becoming Independent, is confident White will succeed. "She's got a lot of drive and a lot of ambition," Lawrence said.

White, a San Francisco native raised in the Mission District, already has a track record of advocating for the developmentally disabled.

She's a Becoming Independent board member and chairwoman of the 15-member Consumer Advisory Committee, which offers policy and program advice to the state Department of Developmental Services. White is featured in a video, "CAC Finding a Job," currently playing on YouTube.

Her father, a Navy veteran of World Wars I and II, "taught us how to advocate for ourselves," White said.

White said she has a mild learning disability and it "takes me a little longer" to read and write. She's been working toward a GED certificate at the Santa Rosa Junior College Petaluma campus, and finds algebra and geometry the biggest challenges.

To get to her new job by 8 a.m., White will have to wake up at 4:45 a.m., get ready and then walk 15 minutes to the Petaluma Transit Mall and ride two county buses to the Sonoma center -- a 65-minute trip.

She will get home by bus or car rides as late as 8 p.m.

But White and her family are enthused.

"Oh yeah," said Edward White, 57, her husband. "It takes a lot of pressure off me. Everything was on my shoulders for a while."

Edward works at the Kohl's store in Petaluma, handling inventory. He said he "started from the bottom and worked up," and is now a supervisor.

The Whites, who married in 1973, have two grown children and four grandchildren.

Their daughter, also named Cindy White, lives in Windsor and visits regularly with Conrad.

"I'm proud of her," Cindy White said of her mom. "She'll make more money. (Gov.) Arnold (Schwarzenegger) is her boss."

There's a touch of emotion to White's breakthrough job at Sonoma Developmental Center, formerly Sonoma State Hospital.

One of her sisters, Mary Louise Hagemeyer, who suffered from fluid on the brain, died there at age 6 in 1966.

"Maybe she was calling me somehow," Cindy White said. " 'C'mon Cindy. This is for you.' "

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