

Inherent value: Didlake provides opportunities for the disabled...and those who employ them

By BILL WALSH
Piedmont Business Journal
Staff Writer

Reduced to its essentials, business is all about adding value. A farmer takes a seed and grows it into a crop, adding value. A processor turns the crop into food, adding value. A retail merchant gathers goods from near and far, adding value by making shopping easy and efficient. Even service operations add value. The janitorial crew that cleans the office adds value to a business by giving employees a nicer place to work, by giving clients and customers a place that is pleasant and comfortable to visit.

Betty Dean doesn't so much add value as she just makes inherent value more obvious. Dean is vice president of communications and development for Didlake, a regional nonprofit headquartered in Manassas that works with intellectually and physically challenged individuals in a number of ways, but most notably by preparing them for and finding them employment.

"Didlake is an organization whose mission is to create opportunities that enrich the lives of people with disabilities," Dean explained. "Our primary focus in order to accomplish that is through employment. Today, the primary way in which we create and provide employment opportunities is through contracts with the federal government."

It would be easy to assume, in an age during which the size, scope and role of government is hotly debated, that the organization would be a political hot potato. It's not. It has vast appeal on both sides of the aisle, Dean said.

On the right, conservatives embrace the idea of taking citizens who might otherwise be a



Photo by Doug Stroud

LIFE'S WORK: Betty Dean helps disabled individuals find work. Much more than that, she helps society in general understand that all of us, every one, have something of value to offer.

burden on the taxpaying public and turning them into employed, taxpaying contributors. On the left, there is the satisfaction that comes from helping fellow human beings realize their full potential.

"We are one of the leading producers in what is known as the Ability One Program, a federal procurement program," Dean said. Essentially, certain federal contracts are restricted, but are bid on competitively by organizations such as Didlake, "where a requirement of those contracts is that at least 75 percent of the direct labor on those contracts must be performed by people with significant disabilities."

In that vein, Didlake is the primary provider of custodial services at the Pentagon. It operates the mailroom at the Department of Energy, does much of the grounds keeping at the Naval base in Norfolk, Va., and fulfills contracts that provide total facility management services, technical busi-

nesses, janitorial and custodial services at a number of other federal facilities.

Didlake, which is regional, stretching from Pennsylvania to southern Virginia, serves about 1,800 adults with disabilities each year. Its concentration is in the Washington metropolitan area and in Hampton Roads.

"We do a couple of other things, as well," Dean said, including a business service center in Opal in Fauquier County. Those who work there are employed by Didlake and provide services to small business, "anything from bulk mailings to light assembly projects and things like that," she said.

There are also commercial projects, Dean said. "On all of those projects, the people are employed by Didlake; their paycheck comes from us."

Didlake also supports several hundred people who are placed or are due to be placed in the community as private-sector employees. The organization has almost 300 employ-

ers in Virginia who employ Didlake clients.

"We work with the person, we help them identify what there are suited to do, what they are interested in doing. We work with community employers to help identify job opportunities, then we actually go in with the person to the job, learn the job with them at no cost to the employer and continue to provide support to that individual so that they can be successful," Dean said

That's the cut-and-dried explanation of what Didlake is and what it does. As you might suspect, there is much more.

"What we observe every single day are people who are living with a disability and for whom sometimes that means that society doesn't place a lot of value on them," Dean said. "I see you today, business casual dress, here in an office setting. I already am assigning you a social value. If I were to meet you for the first time, and, for whatever reason, you had

dropped something valuable in the garbage and I first encountered you digging through a dumpster, I might automatically assign you a social value that is very different. People tend to value the disabled, or devalue them, based on their disability.

"What happens is, when you give someone with a disability just that opportunity to have a job, to go to work, to be in a workplace with other people, doing something that is of value, what we see is that the people around them are now assigning a value to them and treating them as valued members of society. We see that every single day," she said.

Didlake also offers Community Inclusion programs. "From a slightly different perspective, in our CIP, we do an expressive arts program," Dean said of another explanation of the nonprofit's contribution to the community — and its ability to refocus the idea of value.

See **DEAN**, Page 48

TC Your Hometown Builder
Team Cheattle

Serving Culpeper, Orange, Madison, Fauquier, Prince William, Spotsylvania, Stafford and the Piedmont area

with
Century 21
NEW MILLENNIUM

exclusive marketing for

TRIGON
HOMES

Custom Builders on Your Lot or Ours

Visit our Dove Hill Community in Culpeper

Terry 540-718-0695 cell
tcheattle@trigonhomes.com

Jim 540-718-2950
jcheattle@trigonhomes.com

www.TrigonHomes.com

Proud to be the **#1**
CENTURY 21® firm
in the World!

601 South Main Street • Culpeper, VA • 540-825-1613

Each Office is Independently Owned and Operated





real estate 411
monthly newsletter

DEAN

From Page 47

"Folks are given the opportunity to create art or engage in dance or drama, whatever. On occasion, we have had the opportunity to have exhibits of one kind or another, and people had the chance to exhibit the art that they created," alongside the work of fully abled artists.

"There was a very nice piece of art that was created by a person who had been in our CIP for a while, and his mother came to the exhibit opening and saw her son's art, hanging on a wall, for sale, with other artists, and she started to cry. She realized that she herself had never in her mind allowed herself to believe that her son could do this. He sold his piece of art and he made money and she realized that she had maybe devalued her son a little bit. She left with a completely different way of looking at him. It's those kinds of things that really stick with you," she said.

Dean has been with Didlake since 2000, coming in as a recently married import from Delaware, where she worked in the financial services industry. Didlake was a good fit from the beginning, in that she handles the organization's communication outreach and also oversees fundraising. But there was more.

She had been active most of her life, Dean said, but much of the activity was all about ME. Her new husband was a recently retired Air Force intelligence officer. "When I married Barry, I began to realize the career that he had had in service and the world view that he had adopted, in terms of looking at things larger than himself," Dean said. "I started to look around and think maybe I could do some things larger than myself, too. Being at Didlake has contributed to that vision, and we have become very involved with our community," where he serves on the Occoquan Town Council, and she is involved in Chamber of Commerce and Rotary Club.



MAJOR JOB: Didlake has been very successful in finding jobs for its clients in the private sector, but the federal government remains a major factor. Among other federal jobs, Didlake workers provide many of the custodial services at the Pentagon.

"I am a person who counts herself very, very lucky to be here at a company where I think I suit the company and the company suits me," Dean said. "Beyond that, I am very fortunate to be living in the community where I live, where I do have an opportunity to make a difference, whether that's in my little town, with the work we are trying to do here at Didlake or in the community at large. The concept of human potential, that's what charges me up — being able to reach out and see potential."

Increasingly, local employers are seeing potential, too.

For those employers interested in offering possible employment to a Didlake client, "contact us and we would connect you with one of our employment specialists, and they would come and see you and find out what the job opportunities are and what is required for that job," Dean said. "I think one of the reasons that Didlake...we have been very, very successful in this field of employment support is that we really go the extra mile to make sure that we are matching the right person with the right job. When that happens, it can be very magical.

"Our experience has been that employers might be a little fearful at first, but what we have found is that the biggest

challenge is to get that employer to take a chance. Once they do, the next thing we hear is 'send us more.'

"You and I, we wake up in the morning and go, 'I've got to go to work today,' or 'I've got to do this job.' For the people that we serve, having a job is, in many cases, a dream come true. It is an opportunity to be out in the world, to have friends, have a social life, feel like you are making a contribution. All of these people that we employ have the opportunity, if he or she wanted, to sit home for the rest of their working life and collect a disability payment of some kind. Instead, they are choosing to go out and work. They are becoming a taxpayer instead of a tax burden. These are people for whom being able to work really means a lot."

Didlake officials walk a fine line between understanding that some potential employers may be interested in Didlake clients because they might work for less. Dean understands that "This is a market like anything else. These are not individuals who want special treatment, and they don't want to be taken advantage of either. The true heart of everything that happens around what we do at Didlake can be traced back to a steadfast belief in the power of human potential. You set the bar and the people tend to live up to the expectations

that you set for them, and that's no different if you are disabled."

As successful as it has been, Didlake is not sitting on its laurels. The organization is increasingly working on programs to help adults with autism, for example.

"So far, much of the work with autism has been done with children," Dean said. "They grow up. They are going to be aging out of the school system, which is a very self-contained environment; everything is there for you as a family to get services for your loved one. Once you're out the door of the school system, there is not a lot available right now. That's what we're working on now."

And in finding ways to put technological advances to work on behalf of the disabled.

"One of the things that have a lot of potential is call centers," Dean said. "Technology now allows call centers to be distributed, and there is no reason why a person with a disability, who may have a difficult time physically getting to a job, can't be sitting in front of a computer at home and managing calls.

"We think that there may be an opportunity to use a couple of new kinds of technology that can help us provide services to expand the level of our provision of complete facilities management," she added. "There are some enhancements to that service using technology that we think we may be able to provide soon.

"On what we call the rehabilitative services side, which involves the people who are directly working with people with disabilities to support them to make sure that they can be successful in whatever job they're in, we have seen a lot of advancements with technology, different opportunities to provide services to people with disabilities to allow them to use assistive technologies to do things that they never thought they could do before. We see that becoming more and more a part of what we do."

Didlake, Inc. is located at 8641 Breeden Ave., Manassas. Call (703) 361-4195.