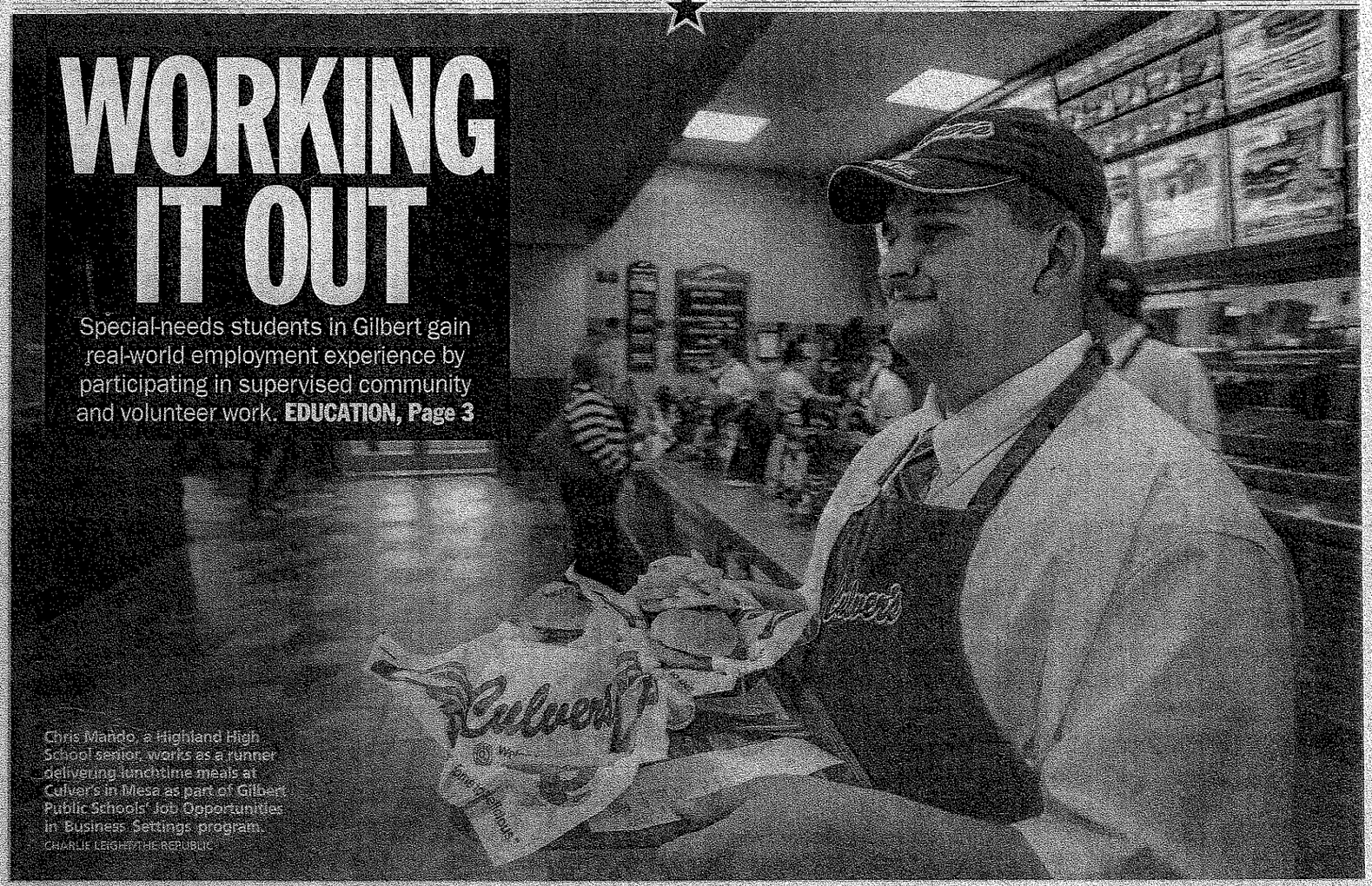
gilbert.azcentral.com

GILBERT REPUBLIC

WEEKEND, NOVEMBER 24, 2012 A GANNETT COMPANY Z12 SECTION GR

WORKING IT OUT

Special-needs students in Gilbert gain real-world employment experience by participating in supervised community and volunteer work. **EDUCATION, Page 3**



Chris Mando, a Highland High School senior, works as a runner delivering lunchtime meals at Culver's in Mesa as part of Gilbert Public Schools' Job Opportunities in Business Settings program.
CHARLIE LEIGHTY/THE REPUBLIC

FREE Photo with SANTA
MON to SUN Noon - 7pm
SUN to 6pm No purchase necessary
40% OFF SALE
ON SELECT 2012 MODELS
See CARS section ad details
THOROUGHBRED CHEVROLET
2121 N. Arizona Ave., Chandler
480-899-0131
www.ThoroughbredChevrolet.com

3 want town to eliminate hotel bed tax

— ACCOUNTABILITY, Page 6

Hoffman wins final board seat in Higley

— EDUCATION, Page 12

Airport looks at workers' health costs

— ACCOUNTABILITY, Page 13

THINGS TO DO » DINING » OPINIONS

Special students gain work experience

By Hayley Ringle
The Republic | azcentral.com

Five days a week during the busy lunch time, Highland High School "super" senior Chris Mando delivers food to hungry customers at a new Mesa Culver's fast-food restaurant.

The Gilbert 19-year-old is earning his first paycheck, gaining real-world job experience and getting help to transition out of high school. As a student with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, the experience is an opportunity to become a responsible adult.

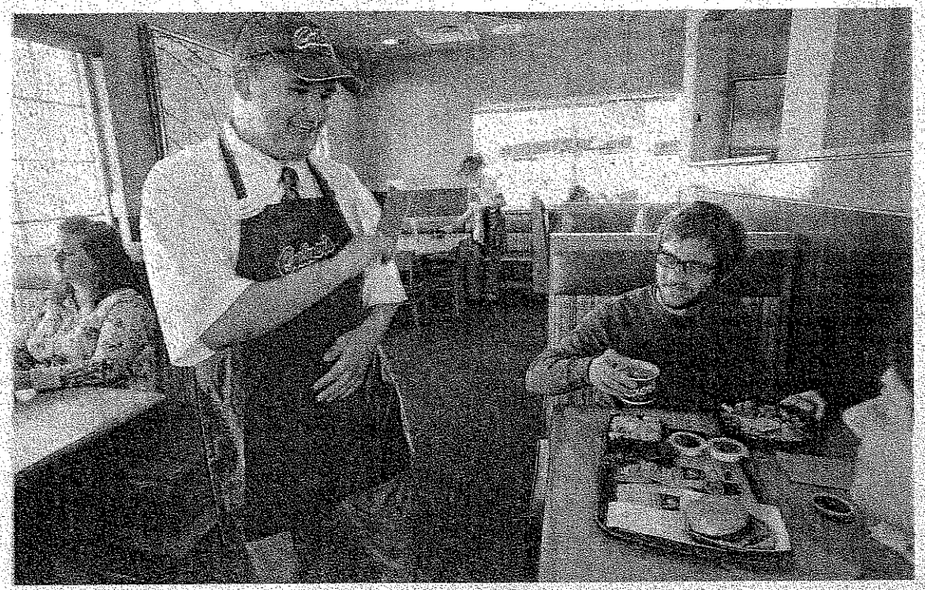
"It's helped me to be more responsible for my actions," said Mando, whose dream job is to work in the movie special-effects business. "I used to be lazy and just watch movies. Now, work has made me more responsible for what I do."

Mando and the other 28 students with special needs are in a unique JOBS (Job Opportunities in Business Settings) program in Gilbert Public Schools. Each student is required to participate in supervised community and volunteer work for a minimum 15 hours a week.

In its two-year existence, students have put in about 4,460 volunteer hours, said Glenna Hastings, a GPS special-education teacher since 2000 who developed the program in spring 2010.

The four-credit course, housed in a portable building on the Highland High campus, helps students find opportunities in job shadowing, volunteering, service learning, internships, apprenticeships and paid employment. Mormon students have been helped to find local volunteer work at the Bishop's Storehouse in Mesa to complete their shorter six-month, eight-hour-a-week missions.

The students, ranging in age from 19 to 22, have an individualized education program (IEP) team that determined they have not yet completed their vocational transition goals, so they are still in school.



Chris Mando (left), a senior at Highland High School, tells customers Corbin Blandino and Tanya Owsinny to have a great day after delivering food to them at Culver's in Mesa. CHARLIE LEIGHT/THE REPUBLIC

MEET SOME STUDENTS

Gilbert Public Schools' Job Opportunities in Business Settings program at Highland High School helps students with special needs find volunteer and paid jobs. Here's a sampling of some of the students and their jobs:

Rebeca "Beca" Martin, 20, helps customers find the right clothes at a Gilbert Kohl's department store. She also volunteers at Greenfield Elementary School as a library assistant on days she's not at Kohl's. "I really like where I work," said Martin, who is graduating in May. "Everyone there (at Kohl's) is so sweet."

Kevyn Barton, 22, is completing his Mormon mission at the Bishop's Storehouse in Mesa. He helps bag food and stock shelves at the grocery warehouse and cannery. He also volunteers at Greenfield Elementary in the cafeteria and at Savers and Arbor Rose Senior Care Living Community in Mesa. Barton is at a second-grade level in school. "I like working at the store, and I like putting the food away," said Barton, who won a public fight in 2009 to walk in the Highland High graduation ceremony with his classmates he grew up with. He will officially receive his diploma in May.

George Bates, 21, volunteers at Arbor Rose, playing games with the seniors, folding towels and helping with the trash. He also vacuums, cleans bathrooms and clears tables at Holy Cross Catholic Church in Mesa, and straightens shoes, clothes and hats and cleans mirrors at Savers. "I love it," Bates said.

Dontai Revels, 19, volunteers at Arbor Rose, Greenfield Elementary, Savers, Holy Cross and St. Anne Roman Catholic Parish in Gilbert. Revels moved from New Hampshire, where he used to wrestle, and play football and volleyball at his old high school. "I like to socialize, and I'm not shy," said Revels, who wants to be a chef. "I like all my jobs."

Levi Gray, 21, is also completing his mission at the Bishop's Storehouse, where he helps stock and bags potatoes and apples. He volunteers at Savers, Greenfield Elementary and St. Anne's, where he mops and cleans up candle wax. He likes being with people and considers Glenna Hastings his favorite teacher and friend. He is graduating in May.

For more information on the JOBS program, call Glenna Hastings at 480-695-2989.

"The success of the JOBS program is predicated by the buy-in of the community," Hastings said. "We're looking for businesses willing to take in workers with special needs."

Hastings and special-education teacher Shannon Snodgrass each lead a class of students with the help of four teacher aides. The teachers help the students fill out job applications, practice interviewing skills and find companies that will take on volunteer and/or paid workers with a wide array of disabilities.

Snodgrass, a 10-year GPS teacher, joined the program this year after the previous teacher retired.

A morning food cart planned to start next week at the district office will provide job experience and money-handling skills, Snodgrass said.

"We try to give them volunteer experience that is transferable into paying jobs," Snodgrass said. "Each student is different with lower- to higher-functioning disabilities. The goal is to get them placed out in the community to learn work skills."

Each student completes a one-hour academic class at their home high school, including math, science and reading, before a district staff member picks them up in school vans and takes them to Highland High. A staff member then drives the students to their jobs and back home after their workday is over.

The lack of transportation and drivers is the one thing that stifles the program, Hastings said, adding that she wants to get the word out to other high schools that the program is available.

Some students must get tuberculosis tests, food-handler's cards and background checks to work in the community, and the program helps them with that.

"All of them (the students) want to be just like you and me," Hastings said. "We've been successful in finding jobs for every student."

Students participate in community-service projects and are collecting socks, sweaters, bicycles, food and Christmas stockings for the homeless and others in need.

Vince Mando said his son has grown immensely, accepted more responsibility and learned new skills with his new job. Before Chris Mando was working, he had various volunteering jobs, including at Greenfield Elementary School and Savers thrift store.

"It's a great experience for

See JOBS, Page 5

JOBS

Continued from Page 3

him," said Vince Mando, a Honeywell test technician. "We've tried before to get him a job, but it's been difficult. He's done very well, and we've been very happy with the job and the (JOBS) program."

Finding companies that will take on workers with special needs is a time-consuming task.

Students also work at bigger companies like Safeway and Fry's grocery stores, Harbor Freight Tools in Mesa and CVS pharmacy, although smaller local businesses are typically easier to work with until they have an "in" with the company, Snodgrass said.

Smaller companies include the Earnhardt Buick GMC car dealership in Mesa, Mike's Burgers, Cheesesteaks and Ice Cream in Gilbert and Sparkle Pool Cleaning in Mesa.

Although students volunteer throughout the district, they can't get paid to work until they graduate, she said. "Some people are very receptive," she said. "These kids just need a foot in the door."

> *We try to give volunteer experience that is transferable into paying jobs. ... The goal is to get them placed out in the community to learn work skills."*
>
> **SHANNON SNODGRASS**
> Gilbert Public Schools teacher

Carissa Rose, the Culver's co-owner of the restaurant that opened at Greenfield and Baseline roads Oct. 15, said she wasn't familiar with the program until Chris Mando applied.

However, Rose and her parents, Dana and Cindy Rose, who own eightCulver's in other states, said the family seeks to hire people with special needs for the busy lunch and dinner times.

"Everyone needs a job and needs money," said Carissa Rose, of Gilbert, adding that she's interested in hiring more high-school students in January. "He's (Chris Mando) super friendly. We truly love having him work for us. He has a great personality, and his hospitality skills are amazing."

azcentral.com Get local news in your electronic mailbox. Sign up for email newsletters at **gilbert.azcentral.com**.