



# Udac Newsletter March 2026

## Center of Excellence in Employment and Community Inclusion

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### Mission

To CHALLENGE disability.  
To CREATE opportunity.  
To CULTIVATE success.

### Vision

To create a community where  
opportunity is accessible to individuals of  
all abilities; one person, one career, one  
possibility at a time.

### Values

Service \* Respect \* Dedication  
Leadership \* Excellence  
Stewardship \* Celebration \* Teamwork

# Ambassadors for Respect

Udac has partnered with PeaceMaker Minnesota to bring the award-winning Ambassadors for Respect (A4R) program to the Northland. Launched in 2013, A4R engages individuals with developmental disabilities as leaders in 4th-grade classrooms, where they teach students about bullying prevention, inclusion, person-first language, and self-advocacy. In collaboration with the Minnesota Governor's Council on Developmental Disabilities, the program strengthens self-advocacy skills for individuals with developmental disabilities while supporting schools in creating more inclusive learning environments.

Udac's self-advocate ambassadors have completed six classroom presentations, receiving overwhelmingly positive responses from both students and teachers and demonstrating meaningful impact in fostering empathy, respect, and inclusion among young learners.



Barb, Paul, Ben & David



Barb, Tracy, David & Paul

## Survey Results - 4th grade classrooms:

Can you list 3 ways to include others? - 97% said YES

Do you know how to use person-first language? - 87% said YES

Could you list 3 ways to advocate for yourself and others? - 84% said YES

## Student comments reflect meaningful change:

*"I regret bullying people, everyone needs love."*

*"I will help people when they are getting bullied and stand up for them."*

*"I will use person-first language."*

*"Be kind and include others."*

*"Respect people and how they are different."*

## Voices of Our Self-Advocates:

*"We are making a difference."*

*"The students listened to our presentation, and it will change them."*

*"People said we changed how they think about people with disabilities."*

*"Person-first language is hard to learn, I think they can do it."*



David, Paul, Ben & Barb



David, Barb, Ben & Paul with Representative Pete Johnson



Megan, Barb, David, Paul & Ben

Udac was proud to be at Disability Day at the Capitol!

Megan, Paul, David, Ben, and Barb alongside Representative Pete Johnson to advocate for inclusion, access, and opportunities for people with disabilities. It was a powerful day of sharing voices, creativity, and commitment to building a more inclusive Minnesota.

# 2026 MOHR CHOICE AWARD – Udac Technology Beyond an iPad - NAO – Innovation in Action



A significant innovation this past year has been the continued development and successful expansion of Udac’s Socially Assistive Robot (SAR) program. Developed in collaboration with the University of Minnesota’s Institute on Community Integration and the University of Minnesota Robotics Institute, The Technology Beyond an iPad program received a MOHR Choice Award for its innovative use of technology in disability services. Early outcomes demonstrate strong engagement, with individuals using the technology to practice job skills, manage daily routines, and build confidence as they move toward greater independence.



*Brian Wiemer and Ben Geisen with Nao*



*Nao, John Skiba, Brian Wiemer, Ben Giesen with Representative Pete Johnson*

Technology innovation, robotics, and AI (artificial intelligence) have rarely intersected with employment services for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD). At Udac, bringing these fields together is essential for transforming traditional disability supports and creating new pathways to meaningful work.

Nao’s innovative work is supported in part by a grant from the Minnesota Department of Human Services. The grant was extended for a third year, allowing the program to expand its impact through a partnership with ISD 709 to introduce this groundbreaking technology to students preparing for employment.

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*The Technology Beyond an iPad Project is funded in part by a Minnesota Department of Human Services Innovation Grant. The contents of this project do not necessarily represent the official views of the State of Minnesota.*

# Talent Spotlight - Rodney Sutherland

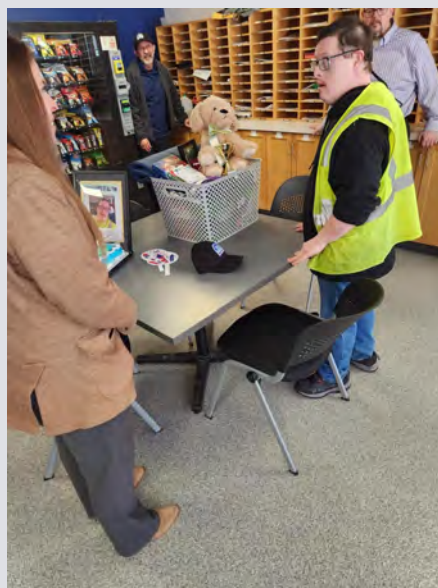


Rodney worked in Udac's mailing and shredding department under a 14c certificate for several years. When Udac ended its 14c certificate and shifted to community-based services Rodney took an important step toward greater independence.

Rodney secured a position with EasyLiving LLC, where he was hired to work at the Duluth Transit Authority (DTA). Over time, Rodney continued to build confidence and independence. Rodney was traveling to and from work on his own using a taxi. His strong work ethic and positive attitude did not go unnoticed and being a dedicated employee Rodney was honored as Employee of the Month. Quite the accomplishment within 6 months.

Rodney worked at the DTA for six years, developing strong relationships with his colleagues forming meaningful connections, and building friendships with coworkers along the way. When his job ended, DTA staff celebrated Rodney with a heartfelt going-away party complete with cake, balloons, and thoughtful gifts to celebrate their colleague.

Rodney was offered a different position by his employer and will continue his employment at a new location.



# Talent Spotlight: Charles Flick

## Learning, Work, and a Path Toward Independence

At 44 years old, Charles has a clear vision for his future. One of his most important goals is to live independently someday—a goal that represents freedom, self-direction, and pride. While Charles has always lived in a group home, he is actively taking steps to build the skills he knows he will need to make independent living a reality.

For Charles, independence begins with literacy. “I want to learn to read so I can take my own meds someday,” Charles shared. “I need to know how to read.”

With that goal in mind, Charles enrolled in the Duluth Adult Education (DAE) – Core Skills Program, where he began working on foundational reading and literacy skills. From the start, Charles approached learning with determination and curiosity. Over time, he has made measurable progress—successfully advancing [two levels / number to be confirmed] in the Core Skills program. Each step forward has strengthened not only his reading ability, but also his confidence.

Charles brings and uses his own laptop during classes, building important digital literacy skills along the way. He practices navigating email, conducting web searches, and using technology to access information in the community—skills that directly support both independent living and employment. These are not abstract lessons; they are tools Charles is using right now to participate more fully in everyday life.

As Charles became more connected at the Adult Education Center, new opportunities began to emerge. During conversations with teachers and peers, Charles shared that he was looking for a job. A DAE instructor helped connect him with an employment opportunity through the Lincoln Park Business Group, demonstrating the power of community relationships and natural supports.



*Pat Castellano & Charles flick*



*Charles working at Lincoln Park Business Group*



Today, Charles is beginning his second year of employment working in the Lincoln Park Craft District. In this role, Charles helps keep the neighborhood clean and welcoming by picking up loose trash along sidewalks and curbs. His work contributes to the vitality of a busy, community-centered business district—and his presence has become a familiar and valued part of the neighborhood.

Charles takes pride in his job and pays close attention to his surroundings. When he notices issues such as graffiti or overfilled trash cans—especially in the nearby neighborhood “pocket park”—Charles takes initiative by notifying or connecting with City workers so the issues can be addressed. His actions show a growing sense of responsibility, civic engagement, and belonging.

Through both DAE and the Lincoln Park Business Group, Charles has developed strong, authentic relationships with teachers, business owners, employees, and visitors. These connections extend beyond paid support and reflect what true community inclusion looks like—being known, trusted, and valued for one’s contributions.

# Thank You to our Employment Partners



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Essentia Health

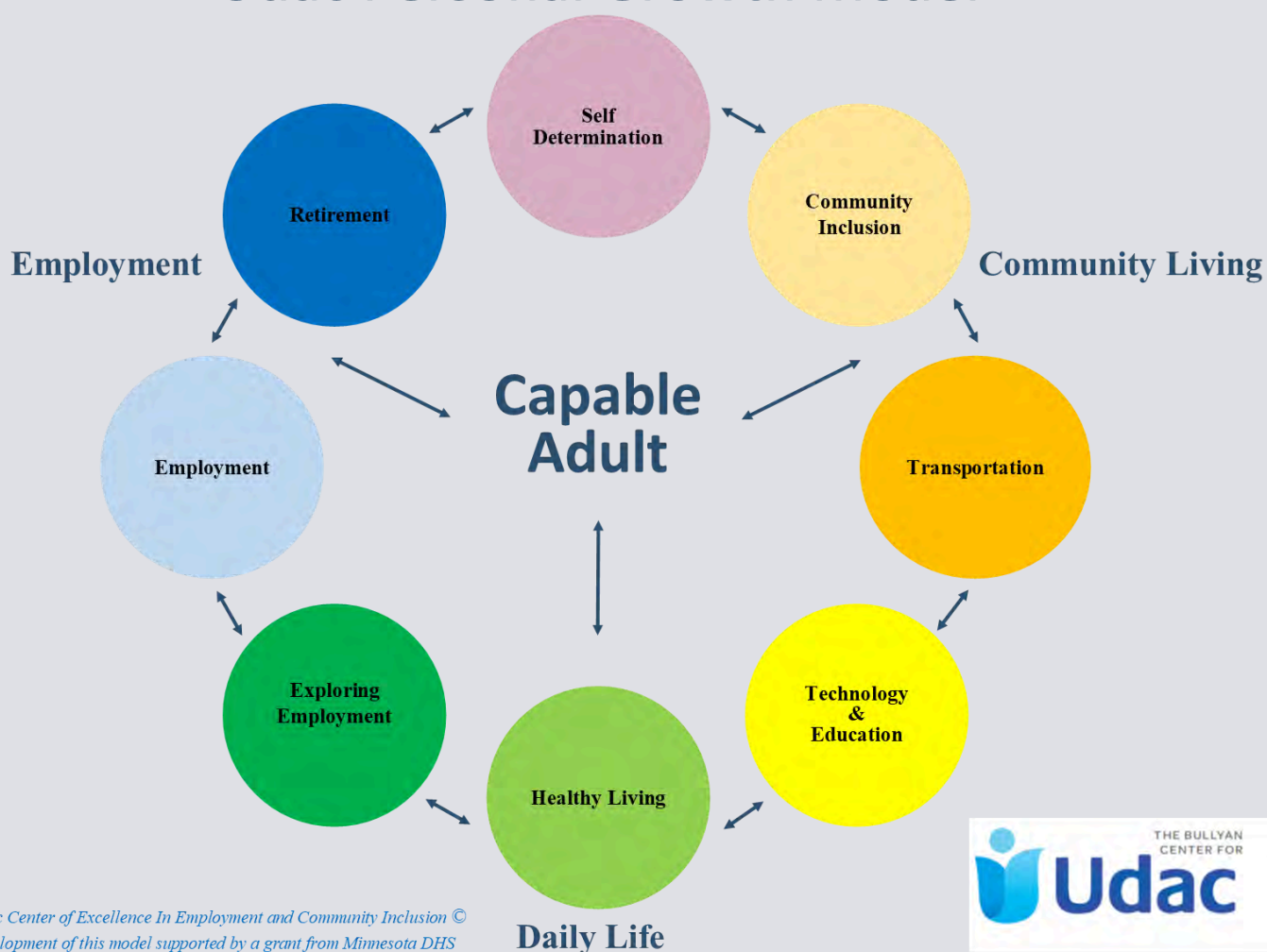


ISD 709  
**Duluth**  
Public Schools



The Udac Personal Growth Model and a dedicated Career and Live Coach can help you create the life you want.

## Udac Personal Growth Model



## Employment and Meaningful Community Involvement

Using the Personal Growth Model, Udac Career and Life Coach's work alongside individuals to identify strengths, interests, and goals, helping each person chart a path toward employment and greater independence. This person-centered approach empowers clients to find jobs that fit who they are, build confidence, and create the life they want in their community.

Find out more at [www.udac.org](http://www.udac.org) to meet with an employment specialist or email [info@udac.org](mailto:info@udac.org)



## Center of Excellence in Employment and Community Inclusion

Udac's Center of Excellence in Employment and Community Inclusion is nationally recognized for advancing best practices that promote meaningful work, self-determination, and full community inclusion for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Through individualized, customized employment strategies and intentional community life engagement, the Center supports people to achieve competitive, integrated employment while building independence, confidence, and natural community connections. This approach moves beyond traditional service models by reducing reliance on paid supports, addressing underemployment and segregation, and partnering closely with local businesses and community organizations to create sustainable, inclusive opportunities. Udac's Center of Excellence is not building programs around people—but building community with people—ensuring each individual has the opportunity to contribute, belong, and thrive.

### Employee Professional Development

Udac's commitment to excellence is reflected in its employees' dedication to professional development and ongoing education. Udac leadership expertise: director of operations with state leadership and 35 years of expertise in disability services, 2 certified benefits counselors, 5 Certified Employment Support Professionals, 2 certified in customized employment-3 in process, 1 person-centered certification, APSE membership for 8 managers, MTI participation of 9 leaders, all employees receive formal customized employment and person-centered education.





Donate Now

At Udac, we believe everyone deserves the opportunity to live, work, and belong in their community. Your support makes that possible. Donations to Udac directly fund programs that promote independence, inclusive employment, and meaningful community connections for individuals with disabilities across the Northland. Together, we are creating pathways to opportunity—one person, one goal, and one success at a time.

**Give today and make inclusion impact possible:**

- \$50- “Give someone the confidence to shine in their first job interview.”

Provide Career and Life Coach support for one individual, helping them prepare for interviews, succeed in employment, and participate in the community.

- \$100- “Empower a child to choose kindness and stand up against bullying.”

Support an Ambassador for Respect session, teaching 4th graders about kindness and anti-bullying.

- \$250- “Create moments of belonging through community activities.”

fund a month of community engagement activities, fostering inclusion and social connections.

- \$500- “Open the door to meaningful work and financial independence.”

Help create adaptive work opportunities for individuals with disabilities, opening doors to financial independence.

- \$1,000- “Transform a life with a year of skill-building and career support.”

Support a full year of skill-building and career development for someone striving for meaningful employment.

- \$5,000 – “Invest in Innovation and Best Practices”

Help us lead the way with research-based cutting-edge strategies that empower individuals to achieve self-determination and meaningful employment. Your gift fuels programs that set the standard for excellence in disability services.

- \$10,000 – “Advance Technology Innovation”

Support technology innovation that enables job skill development and career independence. Brings technology to life—help individuals use technology, such as socially assistive robots (SAR), to practice workplace tasks, develop confidence, and thrive in employment and community setting.

- **Recurring Donation- “Any amount for sustained impact and support!!”**

Thank you for caring. Thank you for making a difference. Together, we are cultivating individual success and building a stronger, more inclusive community.

Scan the QR Code to Donate

