

THURSDAY, JUNE 15, 2006

Cobb



Photos by ANDY SHARP / Staff.

Instructor **Marcus Singleton** (left) helps "customer" **Wayne Martin** check out his purchases as **Buster McFarland** watches at a mock Kroger supermarket set up in the Marietta Enrichment Center, which also houses mock-ups of a bank and an Italian restaurant.

Small-scale living skills

Marietta training center gives disabled practice in basic tasks

By **CRAIG SCHNEIDER**
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Christopher and Jeremy Steuber's tantrums keep them out of nice restaurants.

Their family hasn't taken them out for a fancy meal since the autistic brothers lost their tempers in a restaurant, flew into a rage and swept food and dishes off their table.

Their grandmother, Judith Steuber of Kennesaw, said she felt the stares that day four years ago. She's heard nasty comments other times the brothers, ages 18 and 21, acted out in public: Why can't you control them? They need a swift kick.

"A lot of times we just have to leave," said Steuber, who has cared for the brothers since their mother died in 1988.

These frustrating and embarrassing moments often keep people with autism, mental retardation and other developmental disabilities apart from the community. Since enrolling the brothers in a new Marietta training center, however, Steuber has begun taking them with her to the grocery store.



Charles Gordon counts out money for a transaction at a mock SunTrust bank. The 40 adults in the program at the enrichment center learn to pick out shopping items, but not put them in their pockets. They learn to sit at a restaurant, but not take another person's food. Some start at step one, learning the purpose of a grocery store and how it works. Depending on their capacity, some may open a bank account, order food and pay the grocery bill.

Center: Disabled learn basic coping skills

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The Marietta Enrichment Center, which opened in December, helps people with mental disabilities fit into the community. It employs a rare training method to teach daily living skills so that people don't spend all day at home or with other disabled people.

The center has constructed small versions of a Kroger supermarket, SunTrust bank and Carrabba's Italian Grill. Looking like small movie sets, these mock-ups of the real world let clients practice away behavior problems and learn skills needed to perform tasks most people consider mundane, said Whitney Fuchs, executive director of the nonprofit Georgia Community Support and Solutions, which runs the center.

"It's almost like a dress rehearsal," he said.

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Not all people with intellectual disabilities have behavior problems, but for those that do, mastering these skills makes them feel empowered and independent, if only for a short while, said Fuchs.

The use of artificial training settings is rare and somewhat controversial, experts say. Most trainers teach skills in the real world, actually taking the client to a bank or store, said Jan Blacher, an education professor at the University of California at Riverside. Some scholars say instruction behind closed doors too often stays behind closed doors, without allowing the person to try out his or her skills, she said.

In addition, creating these simulated settings costs money that many treatment centers think can be spent elsewhere. At the Marietta center, the restaurant, bank and supermarket were donated by their respective companies.

Blacher, who researches training methods for people with intellectual disabilities, said artificial settings can help people overcome behavior problems. But, she stressed, the skills must quickly move into the real world or the training is "as useful as a board game."

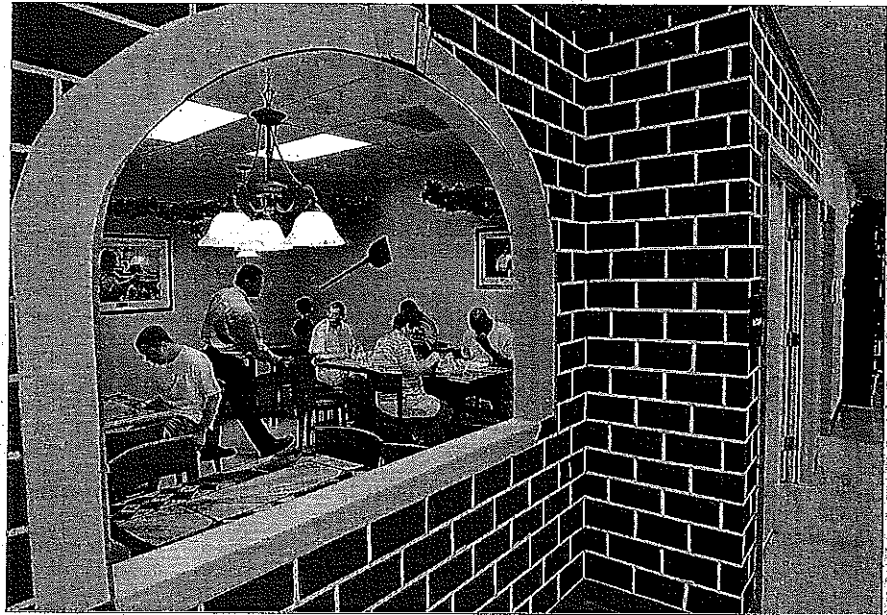
At the Marietta center, Fuchs said clients transfer skills to the real world within days, visiting banks, groceries and restaurants. Then they come back and learn more, he said.

The Marietta program has helped the Steuber brothers, their grandmother said.

"They can pick out what they want" at the store, she said.

Wayne Martin, a 27-year-old man with mental retardation, smiles as he pushes a shopping cart through the mini-Kroger. The representation of the store is only about 20 feet wide and 30 feet deep, with one shopping aisle, a freezer and a checkout aisle topped by a lamp that says aisle 3.

Working with instructor Marcus Singleton,



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Raven Narine, program manager for the Marietta Enrichment Center, assists "customers" with their restaurant skills at a mock-up of a Carrabba's Italian Grill.



Gary Smith uses fake money at the mock bank. Operators of the center say, real-world experience is essential for the skills taught to stick.

Martin gingerly reaches for food cans and plastic fruit that line the shelves. Martin can barely see, but he recognizes shapes and labels. He walks with a limp on thin legs, and claps with crooked hands after he picks out the correct item.

"I like it. It's fun," said the thin man with

close-cropped blond hair and toothy smile. "I like shopping."

What about vegetables? the instructor asks.

"I like cake as my vegetable," Wayne says.

Not every shopper does so well. Some throw tantrums and throw food.

When that happens, Singleton said, he leads the person away from others. He said he avoids lecturing them while they're hot and waits until "they want to listen to me."

Most people who come to the center can't hope for a job — they're too low-functioning. Only about half can talk, but they learn and make friends.

Laura Lee Miller and Charles Gordon consider themselves boyfriend and girlfriend. On this day, they're practicing money skills at the mock bank. Miller places a fake dollar in a slot.

"I did it!" she says.

Gordon does his best to charm her.

"Now look at this," he says, picking out a dollar from among other bills.

Then he sings her a song.

Some clients help clean up and wipe down the tables. A few go on to jobs. One young man left the program to fold boxes at Pizza Hut.

Judith Steuber hasn't taken the brothers back to a nice restaurant, but she has hopes. With a little more training, she said Christopher Steuber could wipe down tables and wash dishes at a restaurant.

She sees both making progress. "It's more than skills, it's attitude," she said. "They don't act as helpless."