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By ROBERT PIERCE

• Leader & Times

Tuesday, officials with Liberal's Mosaic invited community leaders to see what services the agency provides for individuals with intellectual disabilities.

The event, entitled "Discover the Possibilities," according to community relations manager Janeth Leon allows Mosaic to share its mission with the community.

"We ask nothing in return but their name and phone numbers of attendees to do a follow-up," she said.

In this way, Leon said, agency leaders can find out the thoughts and feelings regarding the experience.

During the hour, Leon and others shared three stories of people Mosaic serves, and this gives them a voice, creates a meaningful life and a caring community, according to Leon.

“Our stories give attendees a first look of what our people in service have had to overcome to be where they are today,” she said.

A tour of the facility was also provided, and attendees came into Mosaic’s main office to see it is not a place where individuals live, but rather a place where they come to learn skills to become more independent.

Before the tour, a few of the agency’s leaders spoke to those in attendance, including Kansas 125th District Representative candidate Shannon Francis and his wife, Carol, a few people from USD No. 480 and other individuals from local businesses.

Royanna Borden first spoke about how the local agency fills a need in the community.

“Mosaic provides that support for families whose children progress out of the educational systems,” she said. “I think it’s a very valuable resource for our community.”

Shelley Cooper, who is now the associate director of Liberal’s Mosaic office, spoke about how she began working with the agency.

“It was May of 1989, and I walked through the front door of SDSI,” she said. “That’s what we were prior to Mosaic coming in. I had only one thing in mind, and that was getting a job. My husband had recently been injured in a car accident and was now a paraplegic. He would be using a wheel chair for the rest of his life. We would be 31 years old. We had three little girls at home. We had no income and no health insurance. I had no idea what type of services Mosaic provided, and I didn’t care.”

As she was filling out the application, Cooper noticed a middle age lady lying on the floor of the front office of the building at 441 N. Industrial Ave. in Liberal.

"All I could think was 'Who are these people, and what is this place?'" she said. "She muttered something to me, and two staff from the back came up and got her and took her through the door. I had absolutely no idea what was behind that door."

Cooper then got up and asked the receptionist on hand if she could finishing filling out the application at home.

"What I had just experienced was a little scary," she said.

Cooper took the application home, filled it out, and within three days, she was hired at what is now Mosaic as a general office clerk.

"I had never been exposed to anyone with an intellectual disability," she said. "I had experienced the type of behavior people have when they don't understand something or are confronted with something they're not comfortable with."

Now, having a husband with a disability, Cooper said, made her think about what is now known as Mosaic does for people with similar conditions.

"What kind of barriers do the people that we provide services to face each day?" she said. "That's what helped fuel my passion for advocating and working with people with disabilities the 25 years that I've been here."

Leon talked about some of the misconceptions people have about individuals with intellectual disabilities, including one that says all these people need is shelter and food.

"That is not the case," she said. "They need a place to go have entertainment, family, friends, be out in the community and experience the things that we do every day."

Another myth is that individuals with intellectual disabilities can't grow, which Leon said is not true.

One problem Mosaic does have, though, is keeping workers on staff at the Liberal office.

"A recent study showed that 500 staff members walk in and out of the people we serve," Leon said. "Our turnover is very, very high."

The community relations manager said the problem is that Mosaic cannot be as competitive in the job market as it is needed to keep workers in supply.

"If we were able to increase wages, we would be able to retain staff," she said. "We would be able to build closer bonds with them since the staff is the persons that they see constantly and depend on them for their daily needs. State institutions pay them \$4 more than what we are able to pay our individuals here."

Near the end of the event, Borden said the staff at Mosaic loves the people the agency serves.

"They love them just as much as do their own family, and that's all anybody wants," she said. "They want somebody to love them. They want family to care about them, and they want to know the people are there to support and help them. They want to be a part of your lives too. They want to be family."

To conclude the event, Cooper, Borden and Leon thanked those in attendance, and Leon said the best way for the community to spread Mosaic's mission is to invite other individuals to 'discover the possibilities' of what the agency is.

“People don’t know in the community what we do and what we’re about,” Leon said. “That’s what we’re trying to do. We’re trying to show individuals that we are here and this is what we do.”

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