

# RISE REPORTER

FALL 2023 | VOL. 47, NO. 03



photo: Tilt Photography

## COVER PHOTO:

Jesse Seelye assists customers during his workday. He is supported by our Minnesota Employment Center, which assists people who are Deaf, DeafBlind, and Hard of Hearing in school-to-career transition, career exploration, and career planning.



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## LETTER FROM THE PRESIDENT



Happy Fall! Seasonal changes are a great reminder that transitions are constantly happening around us, and while changes may bring uncertainty, they also can have a positive impact. At Rise, we are fortunate to be part of so many people's lives through times of both contentment and transition.

This newsletter was compiled throughout the month of October, which is nationally recognized as Disability Employment Awareness Month. So, you will see a specific employment focus throughout the issue. In addition to all the community updates you're accustomed to in the Rise Reporter, I'm excited to share the outstanding success of our Rise'ing Stars, whose achievements we celebrated at our summer picnic. I'm so inspired by their efforts as they surpass their personal and professional goals. You'll also hear from others we support who are overcoming barriers to find work success.

We've provided personal and employment support for decades and I see the significant impact that well-paying, fulfilling work has on all our lives, which brings me to another important update:

As you may know, we have strategically set an ambitious goal to end our center-based employment programs and shift all employment services into community-based work settings by April of 2024. This transition will eliminate Rise's use of a special minimum wage certificate, and we are well on our way to meeting our goal. Our team members have worked to find new positions that fit the individual goals and skills of those we support. Together, with our valued business partners, we have created many new community jobs for people coming out of center-based work. We believe these changes are better aligned with federal and state policies related to employment services for people who have disabilities and will ensure the viability of our programs moving forward.

So, as another year winds down, we are also transforming our organization once again. I'm so impressed by everyone's hard work and flexibility and am excited to share your success. Thank you all for trusting and supporting Rise during this transition.

Sincerely,

## WHO WE ARE

Rise unlocks potential and opens doors to success for people with disabilities or other challenges through creative solutions and customized support. We envision a progressive, supportive, and collaborative environment that fosters meaningful growth and provides opportunities to live a life filled with purpose.



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# CELEBRATING SUMMER

## Our summer picnic recap, celebrating Rise'ing Stars!

HUNDREDS of staff and people we support turned out for our big summer celebration at Blaine's Aquatore Park. This favorite event is held every other year to bring all of Rise together for an afternoon of food, games, dancing and conversation.

This year we also celebrated six outstanding Rise'ing Stars who are doing big things at work, at home, and in their communities. Read more about each of our Rise'ing Stars on pages 2 -4 of this issue and visit the photo album on our facebook page! ▼



photos: Alex Samek



# CELEBRATING OUR 2023 RISE'ING STARS

**Meet the six deserving people who are doing big things in their communities. They have overcome obstacles, met and surpassed personal goals to achieve great success!**



## **TAIYE AGBOOLA**

Taiye Agboola has always had an impressive work ethic and a strong desire to be independent. He began working on our production floor in 2014 through our sensory program for people who are Deaf, DeafBlind, and Hard of Hearing. While he had occasionally worked at community sites, late last year, an opportunity arose to permanently switch from production to a community site at Ajax Metal Forming Solutions in Fridley, Minn. He was nervous about the change and communication barriers that might arise due to sensory issues. He worked through those uncertainties with sensory staff support and now works independently at Ajax daily!

Taiye's independence and diligent work attitude have allowed him great success. And he continues to thrive while overcoming his naturally introverted personality to communicate more with coworkers and supervisors. He shows up early and works until the very end of his shift. We are so happy to see him find success.

## **RYAN COURTEAU**

The first task Ryan Courteau took on when he became a Finley's Dog Treats store ambassador was to "practice his smile" because he hadn't been out in the community much. He was shy, quiet, and hesitant to engage. But his practice and persistence paid off! Ryan is now so outgoing and social that he was promoted to Senior Finley's Brand Ambassador. He is an outstanding leader who trains new ambassadors in a fun and supportive way.

Even the competition is impressed with his brand knowledge. They recently contacted Finley's founders to tell them about their positive experiences with Ryan at the store level. He has become a next-level employee devoted to and proud of his job. Ryan's future is bright!





## TEDDY HARRISON, JR.



Teddy Harrison, Jr. nurtures an artistic talent that has become a great source of pride and joy. He lives with a brain injury sustained during a car accident when he was three years old, which means he tires easily and can sometimes become emotional. He took up painting through our art therapy program shortly after coming to Rise two years ago and has embraced his talent with extreme passion.

Because he is happiest when creating new and beautiful art, Teddy paints daily, including on his days off at home with his mother. His favorite day of the week is Friday when he paints one-on-one with our Art Therapist, Stacy Gross. This past year he entered his work at the Anoka County Fair, where judges recognized his talent, awarding him a blue and a second-place ribbon!

## JASON HEINBUCH

Jason Heinbuch is a devoted worker and problem solver. Any goal Jason sets, he achieves. He works incredibly well with his coworkers and staff; whenever he notices a problem or sees someone struggling, he'll be the first to volunteer to help. Jason works at Westfall Technik in New Richmond, Wisconsin, where he is called upon to do many different tasks. He loves these new opportunities because enjoys learning new things and problem-solving to be more efficient. He is also skilled at teaching tasks to his coworkers.

Jason is known for his kindness and dedication to his job. You'll never see him sitting down, he loves to keep busy. This attitude makes him a role model for those he works with. Everyone looks up to him and appreciates his heart and passion.





## DANIEL DOOLEY

Daniel Dooley possesses all the qualities of an accomplished person. He has found meaningful work, is creating the life he wants, and continues to rely on his support while giving back to our community. Currently, Daniel is working at Bowlero, a local bowling alley and arcade, where he takes great enjoyment from upbeat customer interactions while hustling to assist his coworkers.

Earlier this year, he stood before the Minnesota Legislature to publicly advocate for the Legislative Mental Health Network bill he supported. Daniel participates in Rise's Individualized Placement and Support program in Hennepin County. The program has allowed him several opportunities to build interpersonal and job skills as he has explored various jobs, finally finding work where he thrives. Daniel is especially resilient as he navigates the ups and downs of life while working toward his goals.

## STACEY GOEDE

Stacey Goede has been a mainstay through some major changes this past year. As Rise transitions our production work to community worksites, she has become an expert in the processes of our Cummins Power Generation work teams as we move this big job from our internal programs into the community at Cummins. The move has come with much change and, at times, frustration, but Stacey has remained professional and dedicated to the work. She has taken on new roles, become an expert troubleshooter, and learned many new things while going above and beyond communicating the changes to our partners at Cummins.

Stacey is an incredibly hard worker who is passionate about her work. She carries a positive and spunky attitude that brings joy and laughter during even the most stressful situations.

Daniel Dooley and Stacey Goede photos not available



picnic photos: Alex Samek





Dan Meyers, Rise Director of Vocational Evaluation and Transitional Services

### MEYERS TAKES ON STATE DISABILITY ADVOCACY ROLE »

This summer, Dan Meyers, Rise Director of Vocational Evaluation and Transitional Services, began his role on the Governor’s Committee on the Compensation, Wellbeing, and Fair Treatment of Transportation Network Company Drivers. The committee analyzes Minnesota’s transportation company driver’s network and makes policy recommendations related to working conditions, treatment, and driver compensation.

Meyers is one of Governor Tim Walz’s ten appointees on the 15-person committee. He was chosen to bring a disability perspective, and his committee work represents the 3,000 people Rise serves and Minnesotans who have disabilities.

Meyers joined Rise in 2015, where he leads a team of staff who assist people in exploring the right job for them and support them in finding and keeping the job. He holds a Master’s from St. Thomas University, and has nearly 20 years of professional experience supporting people with disabilities. ▼

### FUNDRAISING BREAKFAST MEETS GOAL »

Our Rise and Shine breakfast was a hit! Thank you to all our supporters who attended the October event held at the Bunker Hills Event Center in Coon Rapids, Minn.

Rise supporters came together to learn more about the work we are doing and the changes happening at Rise, including new programs, building improvements, and updates on our transition from center-based work to community employment.

We heard from Jacob Bohm, Rob Flood, and Tyler Wollersheim, who have each been supported by Rise in different ways throughout the years and have found great personal and professional success. We were also joined by key supporters, including our founder, Chester Tollefson and his family.

Rise supporter Pam Harris offered a \$50,000 donation match challenge, encouraging others in attendance to “rise” to the challenge and match her donation. We’re thrilled to share that our room full of generous donors met the goal. ▼



photo: Julia Ludovici

photos: (top L-R) Event speakers Rob Flood, Jacob Bohm, and Tyler Wollersheim. (bottom L-R) Joyce Tollefson Capp, Lynn Noren, David Tollefson and Chester Tollefson.



**REMEMBERING KARI WAGNER »**

The family of Kari Wagner held a special memorial lunch at Rise Crystal in August. Kari regularly attended Crystal’s day services program for many years. She died in May, 2020.

Her parents, Gary Nicholas and Nancy Carol Wagner treated all of Crystal to an afternoon luncheon with special games and activities to celebrate Kari’s time with us.



**« GOOD TIMES IN NEW RICHMOND**

People we support and Rise team members from Wisconsin and beyond joined together in July to march in the annual New Richmond Fun Fest Parade. We were so excited to greet people and throw candy along the parade route each year.

**RISE JOINS FALL PRIDE FESTIVITIES »**

A big shout-out to our LGBTQ+ employee resource group, who joined us in representing Rise at two Minnesota Pride Celebrations in St. Cloud (pictured back cover) and Columbia Heights (pictured right), both held in September.



**« ANOKA OPEN HOUSE**

We welcomed many people to tour our newly remodeled Anoka facility during a July open house. That included area elected officials John Hoffman (MN Dist. 34), Mandy Meisner (Anoka Co. Dist. 7) and Julie Jeppson (Anoka Co. Dist. 6) pictured left to right with Rise intern Eleanor Jeppson and Lynn Noren. Anoka County CDBG funding helped to fund the project.





# MAKING HIS ROUNDS AT DECK AND BASEMENT

*Meet Alex, who with some patience, persistence, and team work has found success with Minneapolis deck builder, Deck and Basement.*

Alex White enthusiastically guides us through Deck and Basement, his workplace in Northeast Minneapolis. As he describes his tasks, his excitement occasionally leads him astray, but his supervisor, Wendy Fisher, asks him questions that steer him back on course. This tendency for distraction is a characteristic both Alex and his support system tackle daily.

“When he starts asking questions about things he can have, I say, ‘Alex, we need to work first, and then we can talk about things. Is that okay?’” Fisher says. “He usually says, ‘Yeah, that’s fine.’ But sometimes needs a reminder.”

He’s held his part-time position here for two years. Twice a week, he works to empty trash from office and warehouse spaces, cleans offices, stocks bathrooms, and performs other janitorial duties. “My favorite part is mixing up the mopping solution,” he said.

Alex is captivated by wood, so working in an environment with a deck showroom and lumberyard is challenging for both him and the Deck and Basement crew. “Alex gets very excited, and when he gets excited, his hands fly. He’s not trying to be forceful; it’s just one of his things,” Fisher said. “He especially likes wood that hasn’t been green-treated. He asks to take it home.”



Alex White at work.

Guiding Alex through these moments of distraction can be challenging, but with consistent support and feedback from his Rise job coach, Sarah Gustafson, he and his supervisors have built a positive relationship, enabling him to have long-term employment that he enjoys.

“I do good stuff,” he said.

Deck and Basement employees like seeing Alex when he is at work and are proud of their relationship with him and with Rise. The persistence to work together pays off in several ways as the company works to create an inclusive environment.

“Everyone deserves an opportunity. If we can do it, that’s great,” says Fisher. “If the opportunity doesn’t work out for that person, it’s okay too.” ▼



# SUPPORTED EMPLOYMENT

**Tsega Afrassa overcomes language barrier to excel at work.**



photo: Tom Brinker

Tsega Afrassa and Rise DSP  
Lisa Bauman at their Minneapolis  
worksite, Integer.

**BY TOM BRINKER**

Rise worked with nearly 3,000 people with disabilities and other challenges last year as they achieved their goals. Many people work together on Rise teams at local businesses. People learn valuable skills and gain friendships at these jobs, all while earning a paycheck. One of these talented workers is Tsega Afrassa. She is a production associate at Integer, a medical device manufacturer in Minneapolis.

Finding a supportive job can be difficult for people with disabilities. Lisa Bauman, Tsega's direct support professional (DSP) says, "Without a place to go to work people feel isolated." She continues, "Socialization and learning to be

independent is so important. Not everyone has that at home."

Tsega, 37, has worked at Integer for nearly two years. Tsega works four days a week alongside a group of other rise workers. This team supports Integer's production of medical devices, including pacemakers. They often complete over 5,000 production tasks together every day, including assembling product shells, peeling adhesives, and collecting recycling.

English is Tsega's second language, so she needs support when navigating common workplace situations. Tsega connects with her DSP Lisa regularly to discuss scheduling and work assignments, advocate for Tsega's needs at work,

and make connections with other workers. Lisa joins rise workers on-site at Integer daily to be an advocate in the workplace. "I make sure everyone has what they need to do their job successfully," she said. "Some people I work with need a lot of support, but some people don't. I'm here to make sure each day goes smoothly and be available when people need me."

Tsega has learned that group employment is ideal for her, at least for now. "My favorite part of the job is talking to people and making friends here," Tsega explains. She has learned many skills and proudly declares, "I am organized, friendly, and fast." Lisa jumps in to boast about Tsega's skills. "You are



both independent and a wonderful team player. You're always willing to help others."

Our business partners are an important part of people's employment journey. "Integer allows for independence for the people working here. They are also very inclusive to workers like Tsega. For example, they host a special celebration lunch during Ramadan that people really enjoy," Lisa said.

Lawrence Loftus, a supervisor at Integer, explains how Rise workers boost the workforce. "The rise team brings a very upbeat attitude to the work floor and does very detailed work." Having these dedicated and talented team members proves essential in times of change. "We are constantly growing, and Rise has always been a dependable source to ask for help," he said.

"Tsega can manage tasks at a high level and is detailed in the work she does," said Lawrence. "It's always a pleasure to see an associate like Tsega with a smile after a day of hard work!"

In her free time, Tsega enjoys cooking and baking as well as making time for her wellness. "I'm good at baking a cake with chocolate and vanilla swirl," she said. "I also like to go on walks with friends and I use an exercise bike at home." As she considers her future, Tsega is open to a long tenure at Integer. "I don't know what's next, but I like it here!" ▼

### VOLUNTEERS MAKING AN IMPACT »

Volunteer groups made up of community members, business partners and Rise Board of Directors have turned out in impressive numbers so far this year.

More than 70 people donated 175 hours of their time to Rise. Thank you so much, we appreciate it! ▼



Above: Cummins volunteers at Coon Rapids in October.  
Below: Highlights from our New Richmond Brewery Event

### HIGHLIGHTS FROM OUR NEW RICHMOND GATHERING »

Team members, supporters, people we serve and their families filled the taproom inside New Richmond's Lift Bridge Brewery in late July. We were so excited to get together to socialize and raise funds for Rise programs. ▼





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TWIN CITIES, MN

1. Rise Picnic Celebrates Summer (p. 2) 2. LiftBridge Brewery in New Richmond hosts Rise (p. 9) 3. We celebrate Pride (p. 6)  
4. & 5. Our business partners turned out to volunteer this fall (p. 9) 6. Wisconsin summer parade fun (p. 6)



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