

# RISE REPORTER

WINTER 2024 | VOL. 48, NO. 01



photo: Tilt Photography

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## LETTER FROM THE PRESIDENT

Isn't it strange how time can change things? The snowy winter weather last year impacted so many people, including transportation services for those we serve. Fast forward to the new year, and we are experiencing some of the warmest winter temperatures ever! Many of our traditional seasonal activities have changed this year with the lack of snow and cold, but I'm grateful for our drivers and the people we serve, who deserve a break from the transportation headaches caused by last year's ice and snow.

I'm excited to pass along a couple of updates to you. As you know we are transitioning our work programs into the community, and we will reach our goal this month. This is a huge milestone for Rise and the people we serve, one that we have been working toward for many years. While this has meant a significant change for some of the people we serve, it is also directly in line with our mission of connecting people to their communities. I'm so proud of how hard people we support and our team members have worked to ensure a smooth transition.

You might have also heard that we have a big move in the works at Rise. Beginning April 1, **our new administrative office address will be 6499 University Ave. NE** in Fridley. This is connected to our community-based work transition. With so much space allocated to a production floor in Spring Lake Park, the building no longer meets our needs. The new location is only about four miles from our current office, and we are happy to stay in Anoka County, where we've had valuable partnerships for more than five decades.

This winter issue is filled with accomplishments of the people we support and our Rise team members. We recently recognized our outstanding team members, and it is always wonderful to share their accomplishments with you. Our teams work hard. Rise's mission isn't possible without their contributions, and I'm so grateful to all of them. Enjoy reading about their achievements!



Lynn Noren  
Rise President & CEO

## 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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## STAFF

### Lynn Noren

President & CEO

### Kathy Klang

Chair, Rise Board of Directors

### Noel McCormick

Vice President of Advancement

### Kelly Bartnick

Communications Manager; Editor

## COVER PHOTO

Htwa Meh, who is supported by Rise's Minnesota Employment Center, sorts through donated items at Goodwill in Roseville. Htwa has recently taken a new position with Target.

## CAPITOL CORNER

*MN legislative updates this session*



*The MN legislative session kicked off in early February 2024.*

*Get involved!*

## DISABILITY SERVICES DAY AT THE CAPITOL

*is Thursday, March 19, 2024*

## MARK YOUR CALENDARS NOW

*and join us at 10 a.m. as we rally in the Rotunda*

*Learn more about the bills we are watching and get updates on legislative actions in Minnesota and Wisconsin at*

***rise.org/advocacy***





photo: Alex Samek



photo: Julia Ludovici



photo: Julia Ludovici

Top photos: (left) Janis Hooker and guest win Rise swag at our team member year-end party held in Mounds View. (right) Deb Humann, Kayla Humann, and Ashley Schumacher smiling at the photo booth during our annual CBTE programs holiday celebration held in Fridley.

Bottom photos: Jamie Ross (left) and Amanda Lorenz (bottom) maintain the stables for horses at Laughing Horses Ranch in Deer Park, Wisc. as part of a supported employment team there.



photo: Julia Ludovici



# CELEBRATING OUR BUSINESS PARTNERS

**Congratulations to our Community Partners of the Year, and state winners.**

We love to make connections and celebrate relationships. Late last fall we named three long-time business partners as our 2023 Community Partner Awards.

## **CABELA'S, WOODBURY, MINN.**

Cabela's has hired three people in independent job roles over three years. The jobs are supported by a Rise job coach. When challenges arise, Cabela's managers are accommodating and supportive and are always willing to work together to find solutions.



photos: Alex Samek

*Right: Rise President and CEO Lynn Noren presents the Cabela's team with their Community Partner Award. Noren was joined by Julie Zbaracki from MOHR to present Polywater with the MOHR Outstanding Disability Employer Award.*

*Medline was not able to receive their award in person, so they are not pictured in this issue.*

## **MEDLINE INDUSTRIES, ROGERS, MINN.**

Rise and Medline partnered to form a supported employment site during the 2020 pandemic. Currently a team of seven people and one Rise support staff work at the Rogers distribution center five days per week. Medline consistently provides the team with tools and resources needed for daily work. They also focus on team communication and morale, ensuring our Rise team is happy and successful. In 2023 they held a special Rise team event in recognition of the team's contributions to their business. Medline is collaborative and

supportive of the people we support in their distribution center, as well as Rise's mission.

## **AMERICAN POLYWATER, STILLWATER, MINN.**

Our longstanding partnership with Polywater began with our New Richmond, Wisc. Location more than 25 years ago. Initially, they contracted production work from the New Richmond production facility. Now a full supported team is onsite in Stillwater each day. They have also hired directly

from our crew, allowing people to flourish in independent employment with competitive wages. Our Polywater teams are excited to go to work each day because they feel welcome.

In addition to being named an Community Partner Award-recipient, in 2023, Polywater was named an Outstanding Disability Employer from the Minnesota Organization for Habilitation (MOHR), recognizing their innovative, longstanding, and noteworthy partnership with Rise. ▼





# TALKING ABOUT EMPLOYMENT

**Our candid conversation with employers who support Rise teams compares disability employment myths to reality.**



Sen Zhao, representing Cummins, shares the panel discussion with (left to right) Amy Delis (Bix Produce), Dan Meyers (Rise), Joe Ruzynski (nVent) and panel moderator Laura Brock (nVent).

HAVE YOU EVER wondered about the barriers of disability employment? It’s a question our employment teams field often, especially when guiding new businesses through the process of hiring workers with disabilities. But you know what? We usually tell them, “there aren’t as many barriers as you might think.”

Last fall we brought every-

one together for a frank discussion about disability employment. Representatives from our long-time partners, nVent and Cummins, along with Bix Produce, joined us in a moderated panel sharing their experiences of how Rise teams foster a positive work environment while contributing to high-quality products and a healthy bottom line.

## Exploring Employment Myths

Employer concerns typically revolve around five main areas:

1. Accommodation costs.
2. Mental health challenges in the workplace.
3. Mobility issues affecting productivity.
4. Training new and unfamiliar workers.
5. Transportation hurdles.

IMAGES: ALEX SAMEK



Rise Program Director, Dan Meyers, understand the concerns. But he's quick to reassure. "It isn't like people need to do a remodel or put in new bathrooms for workers with disabilities," Meyers said. "It's typically very inexpensive. New equipment might include something minor like a timer to alert people when their break is over or a white board for communications. Also, we have employment consultants that will come out and problem-solve. We're there to help," he said.

Panelists agreed with Meyers.

"One of our questions was, 'Is the team going to go fast enough? This is a production line. Can they keep up?'" said Amy Delis, Vice President of Human Resources at Bix Produce. "Very quickly the team asked for goals because they wanted to go fast enough. It forced us to create metrics," she said.

"When I think about accommodations we've made, they're similar to safety and ergonomics accommodations we make for all our employees," said nVent President of Enclosures Joe Ruzynski. "The quality of our Rise team is as good as the quality of any group in our Anoka factory and many of our other factories."

### Part-Time Work

Many of the people we support cannot work full-time. It's a bit of a shift for most employers used to employing full-time teams, but it's crucial for benefits like medical and housing needs. "They're going

to need those benefits for the rest of their lives," Meyers said.

"We haven't had to make any accommodations. The only change for us has to do with hours because many of them are part-time," said Cummins Logistics Director Sen Zhao. "So, we decided to employ them during our core business hours from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. We also have a second shift team of our own employees who do the exact same work that our Rise team does."

### Changing Minds

But it's not all challenges. Meyers reminded the crowd, "Rise works with interesting people. They're going to bring their fun personalities to your workplace. Your culture will positively change."

And somewhere during the conversation, though all the panelists have specific employment needs, a unifying message emerged: Workers with disabilities are a vital part of the workforce who make excellent employees.

"Finding good, dependable workers is the single largest challenge most companies have. We went from 50 Rise employees to 70 employees. Not all work in small parts, others work in different parts of the factory. We're always looking for ways to expand our partnership Rise." Ruzynski said.

"We've evolved from one team to three," said Delis. "When we have an opening in an area, we think, 'Is this an area that a Rise team can help?'" ▼

*About 150 people attended the informational business networking event.*







# PERSONAL MILESTONES

After decades of support, two people are looking forward to new experiences.



Dennis Kiekhofer assembles and boxes specialty plastic shims, one of his final projects on the New Richmond production floor before his January 2024 retirement.

DENNIS KIEKHOFER has lived two professional lives. He grew up on the family farm near Deer Park, Wisc. and worked on the livestock and crop operation into his 50s where he says days were filled with hard work and long hours.

“I was getting to where I couldn’t bend down to milk cows and do other things. We also used to have a hog operation,” he said.

So, 20 years ago he began a new career in New Richmond. “My sister got me started here. The first day we worked on rubber boots. I pounded rivets into the bottom so people wouldn’t slip on the ice,” he said.

Dennis is a faithful and dependable employee who likes working at Rise, and especially enjoys spending time with the people

and staff. He admits there are very few jobs he hasn’t done over the past two decades there. And he’s also witnessed changes like a new building, and a new name when ESR merged with Rise.

Now in his 70s, Dennis transitioned to full-time retirement at the end of January 2023. “I’ve pretty much done all of it,” he said, pointing around the New Richmond production floor on one of his final days of work there. “My family told me it’s about time,” he said. “I’ve been here long enough.”

After 20 years of driving to town each day for work, he’s prepared for some quiet time, but also unsure of the future. He knows he’ll stay busy with some small farm projects. And he expects to spend much of his time in the outdoors, which he enjoys. ▼



CONGRATULATIONS to Mary Conroy, who recently celebrated her 50th year of receiving support services at Rise. Mary worked on the Spring Lake Park production floor for many years. She recently transitioned to our Coon Rapids Life Enrichment Program, which celebrated her achievement. ▼







# EXCELLENT LEADERS

**TWO TEAM MEMBERS RECOGNIZED WITH EXCELLENCE IN LEADERSHIP AWARDS CELEBRATING THEIR OUTSTANDING ACCOMPLISHMENTS AND CONTRIBUTIONS.**



**TRACY JOCHIM**  
PROGRAM SUPERVISOR  
FOREST LAKE, MINN. >>

Tracy Jochim has excelled at building a top-notch strengths-based Forest Lake team. Because she has such a strong desire to create a solid program, she empowers her team by ensuring they understand how their actions support the success of our programs and contribute positively to the lives of the people we serve.

Like many good leaders, she has a proactive management style, and is willing to collaborate with other managers across Rise. And she also volunteers on behalf of Rise in the Forest Lake community.

Tracy is a model of respect and professionalism. Congratulations, Tracy!



**ANNE MORNES**  
QUALITY ASSURANCE  
SPECIALIST >>

Anne Mornes inspires her teams to meet and exceed their goals every day. With a calm demeanor that has become a signature part of her management style, she takes time with people and encourages them to collaborate with each other to achieve success.

By setting clear person-centered expectations based on people's strengths, Anne's teams feel empowered to step outside their comfort zones and flourish in ways they didn't expect.

Anne is a mentor people know they can trust. She is respectful, reliable, communicative, and kind. Congratulations Anne!

# Celebrating our 2023 **CHAMPIONS OF THE MISSION**

Rise team members are an extraordinary group of individuals who carry out and champion our important mission. Each month their peers nominate them for a Champion of the Month recognition. From that small group a committee selects the employees to be honored as Champions of the mission. Congratulations to our 2023 Champions of the Mission, who received their awards at our Rise year-end celebration.

Congratulations to all our Champions of the Month. Nominations happen annually August to July. Read more about each monthly champion on the the pages following the Champion of the Mission recipients. ▼



photo: Alex Samek

## Stacy Gross **ART THERAPIST**

Stacy has served Rise as an art therapist for more than seven years. She connects with people through our Art Speaks program, which provides people we support with a creative outlet while providing valuable therapeutic benefits.

Stacy inspires people around her each day. She excels at finding new methods and ways to create art, which allow everyone an opportunity to participate. She is innovative, inclusive, respectful, and compassionate.



April Heckard  
**EMPLOYMENT CONSULTANT**

April joined our team about four and a half years ago as an Employment Consultant. She brings over a decade of experience in Day Training and Habilitation and job coaching work.

She is exceptionally dedicated to her work. Her team recognizes her passion and admires how she challenges herself to be a leader in her field. She has also been a wonderful resource to new team members and has worked to develop strong relationships with clinicians as more people returned from the Covid-19 pandemic, which tripled her caseload.



photo: Alex Samek

Janis Hooker  
**DIRECT SUPPORT PROFESSIONAL**

Janis often says Rise chose her during her first experience with us as a CIP intern through a college retraining program. She eventually joined us full-time and is now a 29-year Rise veteran. Her day-to-day DSP duties include transportation and supervising a team at nVent.

Janis has a caring heart, and continually searches for positive solutions to make work manageable for the people she supports. She is involved, reliable, and flexible.



photo: Alex Samek

*Read more about our  
Champions of the Month on pages 10-12.*

August 2022



Denise Gibson  
**PRGM SUPERVISOR**

**What Colleagues Say:**

Denise is compassionate, hard-working, a problem solver, and a team player. Her her dedication to supporting others also includes her fellow team members! She she carves out time to help them with a tasks too.

August 2022



Kelli Johnson  
**CASE MANAGER**

**What Colleagues Say:**

Kelli is as helpful and supportive as they come. She helps out other DSPs before and after crew duties. She even drives routes when drivers are out. Kelli goes above and beyond with all those she supports.

September 2022



Rachel Wilson-King  
**QUALITY ASSURANCE SPEC**

**What Colleagues Say:**

Rachel's role requires her to frequently discuss delicate topics with people we support and team members. She shows concern and respect for everyone as she works toward creative solutions.

October 2022



Brandon Klug  
**DIRECT SUPPORT PROFESSIONAL**

**What Colleagues Say:**

Brandon's motivation comes from his work supporting others. They raise his spirits on bad days. He recognizes and appreciates differences in others and is always willing to work through concerns.

December, 2022



Lisa Bauman  
**DIRECT SUPPORT PROFESSIONAL**

**What Colleagues Say:**

Lisa is dedicated to serving individuals in the disability community. She shows up each day with a positive attitude. She goes above and beyond to help others and always has a smile on her face.

December 2022



Kelly Bartnick  
**COMMUNICATION & VOLUNTEER MGR**

**What Colleagues Say:**

I've always been impressed with Kelly's abilities to tell the stories of people we support in dignified and fun ways that align with our mission.



January 2023

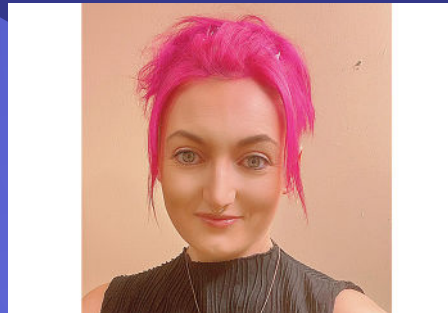


Alicia Skoblik  
**EMPLOYMENT  
CONSULTANT**

**What Colleagues Say:**

Alicia is a fierce advocate for those she supports, and is a champion for teammate growth and learning. She recognizes that success in employment connects to access to basic necessities.

January 2023



Gabbie Rodriguez  
**COMMUNITY  
EXPLORATION SPEC**

**What Colleagues Say:**

Gabbie takes all disabilities into account when planning activities and modifies them in many ways. Even when schedules change, she takes on the challenge, ensuring people we serve are always busy.

January 2023



Tate Wegleitner  
**EMPLOYMENT  
CONSULTANT**

**What Colleagues Say:**

Tate shows true enthusiasm and care for his position and for others to succeed. He is a fantastic worker who is excellent with people shows great professionalism while out in the community.

March 2023



Shari Happel  
**CASE MANAGER**

**What Colleagues Say:**

Shari brings joy wherever she goes. Her passion for what she does is what sets her apart and helps continue to cultivate an atmosphere where everyone feels like they can authentically be themselves.

March 2023



Olivia Booth  
**CASE MANAGER**

**What Colleagues Say:**

Olivia is consistently determined to make things better. She is amazingly patient. Team members immediately noticed positive changes when she stepped into her role.

April 2023



Jackie Gadach  
**DIRECT SUPPORT  
PROFESSIONAL**

**What Colleagues Say:**

Jackie's has a habit of going out of her way to help others. She is a positive light on the work floor, and has great connections with the people we support. Everyone looks forward to seeing her each

April 2023



Beth Wilke  
**DIRECT SUPPORT  
PROFESSIONAL**

**What Colleagues Say:**

Beth takes time to get to know our persons-served individually, encouraging them to try new things and challenge themselves. She embodies the person-centered nature of our work.

May 2023



John Barber  
**DIRECT SUPPORT  
PROFESSIONAL**

**What Colleagues Say:**

John recently merged two Ruan crews as we've continued expanding community-based work. He has made the transition look easy, even when performing unfamiliar duties.

June 2023

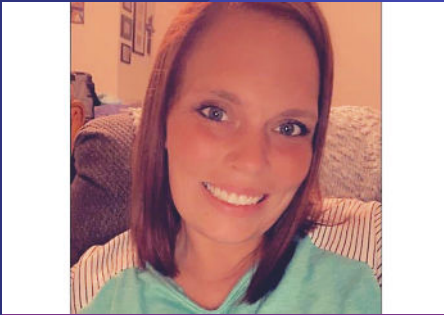


Paige Cihunka  
**HUMAN RESOURCES  
GENERALIST**

**What Colleagues Say:**

Paige is empathetic, patient, kind, and supportive. Her role involves attending job fairs and other recruiting events. Her face lights up when sharing what Rise has to offer workers.

June 2023



Katrina Hart  
**CASE MANAGER**

**What Colleagues Say:**

A direct support role like hers creates opportunity to make an impact on others Katrina understands everyone is different. She gets to know each person and supports them individually while encouraging strengths-based goals.

July 2023



Amy Johnson  
**CASE MANAGER**

**What Colleagues Say:**

Amy recognizes how everyone at Rise plays a meaningful role in contributing to the success of people we serve. She works hard to be collaborative and committed to providing excellent service and is a cheerleader for the people she supports.





# VOLUNTEER CORNER



Our volunteers have been busy these past few months! A special thanks to Brown and Brown, who helped out at holiday party events in both Crystal and Coon Rapids (top left), and to groups from Voya (top right) and the YMCA (bottom) who used their crafty skills to help us prep for seasonal art speaks projects. We are so grateful for all the help! ▼



## TRAVELING INCLUSION EXHIBIT COMES TO SPRING LAKE PARK >>

We were happy to host the MN Governor’s Council on Disability’s Include/Exclude exhibit at our Spring Lake Park office in January. The traveling photography exhibit chronicles the disability services movement and history throughout Minnesota. ▼

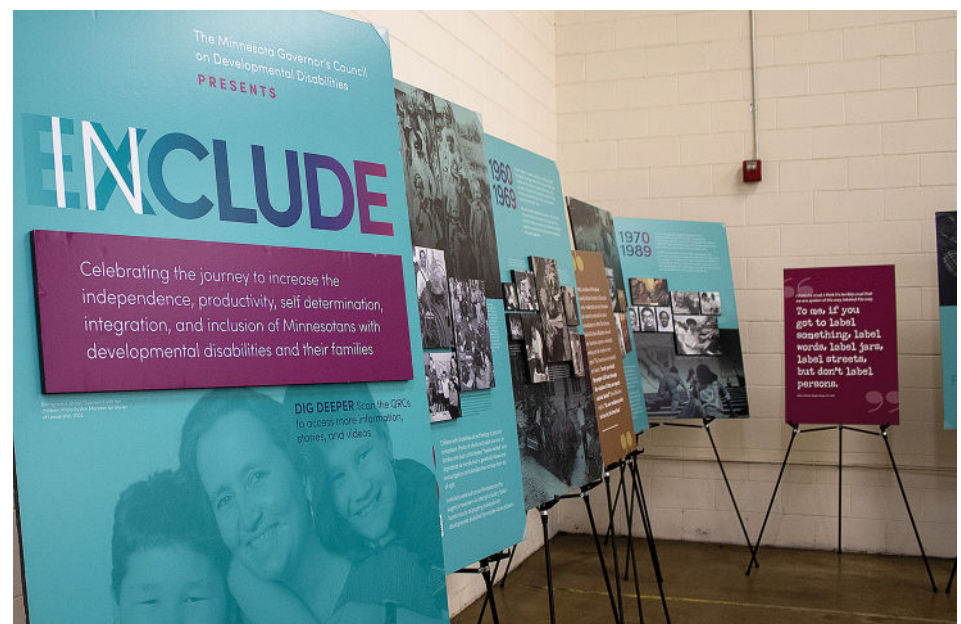


photo: Julia Ludovici



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