

## Planting Seeds — Watching Them Grow!

Jerry Switzer, rehab assistant II with CNY DSO's Integrated Program Services, is known as "the job man" because he helps people we support to obtain employment in the community. As employment opportunities became more scarce, Jerry knew he needed to find an alternative for the men and women who rely on him for skill development.

In October 2006, Jerry 'planted the seeds' with Rome Mayor James Brown and 16 other City Hall officials for an initiative that would grow and blossom! Jerry recognized that people with developmental disabilities could make many contributions and first offered to partner with the Weed and Seed and the Green and Clean programs to help beautify their city. And what grew from those initial seeds is amazing!



Several individuals not only at Job Connections, but also from Stebbins residence, and Barringer, O'Shea, and Walsh day labs have joined with neighbors to help mow, plant, weed, and water four parks maintained by volunteers around the city. For the past two seasons, the Fire and Police Memorial Park (where the crew poses with several firemen, at left), the community park at the corner of N. Madison and W. Thomas St. (below), the Gleason Home across the street, and the Kossuth community lot, have sported beautiful flowers and vegetables.

But Jerry did not stop with that initial effort. Jerry and the mayor began to talk about how to turn volunteer experiences into paid opportunities. Because the volunteer initiatives demonstrated the skills and strong work ethics of the individuals involved, Mayor Brown and Recreation Director Rich Miller took Jerry up on another suggestion — a maintenance experience at the Rome Department of Recreation parks. Jerry and his reliable grounds crew offered to try their hand at tending to city of Rome parks for pay. The city officials agreed and, as soon as the grass grew, the crew began. Ed Taylor, Mike Cardone, and Chris Krebs make up the City of Rome Parks Enclave and are supervised by Job Connections DA Joyce Keiffer. The crew's efforts have resulted in many compliments from the city officials and the general public.



The work done by the city parks enclave was noticed by Mark Minicozzi, a board member of the Cal Ripken/Babe Ruth Division 70 Baseball League. Mr. Minicozzi is also a city of Rome firefighter. The baseball league offered to hire a Job Connections crew to maintain their baseball fields. Paul Herrig, Alena Panara, Felix Loverro, Anthony Kirk, and Frank Arnold are the primary grounds crew members, with oversight by Jerry and DA Deb Koenig. Within a short period of time, very little oversight is needed by this able crew! Frank, Alena, Felix, and Anthony maneuver riding and push lawn mowers, weed trimmers, leaf blowers, rakes and shovels. Their schedule is impressive. The crew is responsible for maintenance of the t-ball, minor A, and Cal Ripkin major league fields, as well as open park areas, at two different locations on Jay Street and Bell Road. They work two days each week for four hours per day, sometimes more if the fields need additional work, in return for minimum wage.



What really speaks to the success of the program, however, is the mutual benefit to the City, to the baseball league, and to the individuals who are working in the program. When asked how she liked the work, Alena's enthusiastic response was "I love it! I'm outside in the fresh air. It's great." Anthony takes great pride in learning from Deb how to use the gas powered weed trimmer, feathering the throttle just right and using a smooth back and forth rhythm to get the job done. Frank has mastered the walk-behind mower as he trimmed behind each dugout and along the edges of the field. Alena and Felix each hopped on a riding tractor, donned their protective ear gear, and started up their engines to take to their respective parts of the field.



Stay tuned, as this crew is not likely to be idle for the winter, and have other indoor seeds to germinate, as well!



Job Connections and other DSO day labs participate in many volunteer projects, a few of which are The National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, Food pantries, Salvation Army, Volunteer Fire Departments, The Root Farm, and Bikes for Kids.

