

APD > Special to the Democrat

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Outten finds career in caring for kids

By Ann Douglas

Being with toddlers all day could be a challenge for some, but for Kerri Outten, it's a joy.

Outten is a full-time staff member at the Child Growth and Development Center in Tallahassee, where she teaches, plays with, and cuddles 2 and 3-year-old children. "The kids are so much fun," Outten said. "I look forward to being with them every day."

Outten has a developmental disability. October is Disability Employment Awareness Month. Florida's Agency for Persons with Disabilities is highlighting the contributions that people with disabilities make to the work force.

Outten, 23, knew she wanted to work with children when she was in high school. During her senior year at Chiles High School, she also enrolled in child-care classes at Lively Technical Center.

After graduation and completion of the child-care classes, she volunteered for a year at a child-care center, hoping to be employed. She finally had the chance to interview with Roman Fontenot, director of the Child Growth and Development Center, early in 2007.

He saw a young woman with unique skills and a passion to teach and care for children.

Fontenot said he did not hire Outten to give a job to a person with a disability. Outten was hired on her own merits as an enthusiastic, motivated young woman with day-care experience and an obvious love for youngsters.

"Kerri's been with us for about two-and-a-half years and does a wonderful job," said Fontenot. "She carries the same responsibilities as the other staff; she's treated no differently. She's more than capable of handling anything that comes her way, and her outgoing personality engages every child in her care."

Asked what she likes most about her job, Outten said, "Just about everything. I love to sing and dance with my children, read to them, and even work on potty training. Every day is new and fun."

And if caring for little ones all day does not use up enough energy, Outten heads for the city pool after work each day. She is a star swimmer of the Area Tallahassee Aquatics Club. In October 2007, Outten was chosen to represent the USA at the Special Olympics World Summer Games.

She practiced intensely at ATAC and in Tennessee before she headed for the international games in Shanghai, China. All her hard work paid off – she brought home silver and bronze medals from two events. "It was the most exciting time I've ever had," Outten said.

APD supports people with developmental disabilities to live, learn and work in their communities. The agency annually serves about 35,000 Floridians with developmental disabilities. For more information about the Agency for Persons with Disabilities, visit APDcares.org.