



Trego Grade School special education teacher Cindy Malay offered to grocery shop for a friend in Wakeeney who has multiple sclerosis. No need, the friend told her, Tyler is at the store to help.

“The young man Tyler helps me put my walker aside and takes my list,” Mrs. Malay reported the woman said. “He knows where everything is.”

Tyler Stenzel, who has Williams Syndrome, a developmental disability, has advanced quickly since he started working at the Wakeeney Food Center in May of 2006 while still in high school. When he started the job tryout in school, a paraprofessional helped Tyler learn the grocery store job. Now 23, he’s become a trusted full-time employee.

“He does everything adult employees do,” said Food Center Supervisor Cindy Welch. “He carries groceries out, he sacks, he faces groceries on shelves, he helps customers find stuff.

“And, this is very important, Tyler is in charge of making the coffee,” Mrs. Welch added. “Customers love him and he loves customers.”

At first, it was a learning process for a few of those customers. Mrs. Welch said when Tyler first began at the store, several people didn’t want him to carry their grocery sacks to their car, possibly afraid he would drop something. But as time passed, this changed.

“Now I have customers request I call Tyler; there was a change in attitude,” she said.

Mrs. Welch said the Wakeeney Food Center, an IGA store, has participated in the job tryout program for students with disabilities at the high school for several years. She said the program has been very successful for them.

“When I was four years old, my dad had a massive stroke,” Mrs. Welch said. “He was 35 years old and he died when he was 70. He didn’t have good speech and one side of his body was paralyzed.

“So I grew up with the knowledge there are things some people can do and some people can’t,” she said. “There’s a place for all of them.”

That work at the grocery store is a good match for Tyler is apparent. Mrs. Welch said Tyler regularly borrows the professional grocery magazines she gets to study what other stores are doing.

“He compares our prices with other grocery stores,” she said.

Tyler Stenzel's success is his own, but classmates, friends and family also are part of how that success came about. Classmates from both Trego Grade School and Trego High School in Wakeeney have been inclusive, reported Tyler's mother, Sue Benisch.

"He had support at both the upper and lower schools," Mrs. Benisch said. "Kids grew to love him, as Tyler. They took him under their wings."

When asked, Tyler took just a second to start naming students he went to school with who remain close.

"There's Nick, Toby....there's a lot," he said, adding that he communicates with lots of friends and former schoolmates on Facebook.

Mrs. Malay, Tyler's former grade school special education teacher, said Tyler has found his niche at the grocery store. Mrs. Malay also praised Tyler's family.

"His mom always gave him good support," she said. "She was always there to back him up or push him to be all he could be."

Tyler's mom, Mrs. Benisch, said Tyler recently enrolled in the Kansas Working Healthy Program, which allows him to save more of the money he makes in his job and still keep needed Medicaid health insurance.

Mrs. Benisch said another of Tyler's interests is railroad trains, and sometimes he'll come running up the stairs at their house with his binoculars when a train comes through Wakeeney.

"We don't even hear it coming, but Tyler does," she said.

At the grocery store, Freezer Manager Mickie Rose said Tyler works very well with other employees.

“He’s really a good kid,” she said.

Evening Manager Cheryl Bowen said Tyler is amazing in his ability to be in the right place at the right time.

“I pick up the intercom to call him to come carry out and he’s right there,” she said. “I think he’s psychic.”