

COMPANY CHEERS WORK OF METRO TECHNOLOGY CENTERS STUDENTS

# Six interns develop skills with jobs at Chesapeake

## Chesapeake offers hope to program

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Chesapeake Energy Corp. is the fifth company in Oklahoma to become involved in Project SEARCH. It is the first that is not a hospital.

Project SEARCH got its start about 15 years ago at Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center as a way to help young people with disabilities develop the skills needed to land a full-time job. It has now spread to 42 states.

The program, which is open to young people between 18 and 24, arrived in Oklahoma about three years ago when officials at the University of Oklahoma pitched it to the state Department of Rehabilitation Services.

The first Oklahoma project was at Valley View Regional Hospital in Ada, which now accepts interns from area high schools.

St. John's Medical Center in Tulsa gets its interns from Jenks Public Schools.

Mercy Health Systems partners with Francis Tuttle Technology Center.

Integris Bass Baptist Medical Center in Enid draws interns from Enid Public Schools.

Kim Osmani, transition coordinator for the Department of Rehabilitation Services, said all program participants have an individualized employment plan with the agency.

Some start working with the agency when they are 16, a connection that continues as long as it takes for them to secure a full-time job, she said.

Judi Goldston, statewide coordinator for Project SEARCH at OU, said that is the program's ultimate goal, not just teaching young people job skills and giving them some work experience.

The program has worked well in Oklahoma, with 79 percent of participants landing jobs after completing their internships.

Osmani and Goldston said they were exciting about Chesapeake's participation in the program, which could be key in helping it expand to other businesses.

Osmani said there will be a summit June 2 to allow other employers to learn about the internship program.



Intern Nathan Madison searches for a file at Chesapeake Energy Corp. on Wednesday.

PHOTO BY STEVE GOOCH, THE OKLAHOMAN

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Nathan Madison likes his job at Chesapeake Energy Corp.

Madison, 23, is transferring information on oil and natural gas wells from old paper files to the company's computer system, as one of six interns at Chesapeake as part of Project SEARCH, a non-paying job skills training program for young adults with disabilities.

He already has finished processing three large file drawers worth of records.

"It's actually easy," Madison said. "All the information is in there."

Madison, who also works at an Edmond nursing home, would like the opportunity to keep working at Chesapeake when his internship is over at the end of June.

"I think it'd be a good full-time job," he said.

Officials did not disclose the interns' disability citing privacy concerns.

The Chesapeake interns, who are Metro Technology Centers students, started working at the end of February.

They arrive on the company's northwest Oklahoma City campus each day by 7:45 a.m. for an hour of job and independent living skills training before going to their jobs.

Company officials are thrilled with the program.

"We've got six great interns now," said Lorrie Jacobs, the company's vice president of compensation and benefits.

Jacobs learned about Project SEARCH last year while serving on a committee at Metro Tech.

### AT A GLANCE

#### JOBS LAND IN VARIOUS AREAS

Six Metro Technology Centers students are part of the inaugural Project SEARCH internship program at Chesapeake Energy Corp.:

- Jeremiah Yorke: restaurant
- Kierra Brooks: human resources file room
- Laquoya Wilburn: community relations and corporate events
- Michael Lofties: fitness center
- Nathan Madison: records center
- Selene Medina: facilities support

Program officials made their pitch to several Chesapeake executives a short time later.

"We thought, 'Wow, we need to do this,'" Jacobs said.

She said Chesapeake officials were so excited about the program they wanted to start as soon as possible.

#### 'Plenty of jobs'

Kim Osmani, transition coordinator for the Department of Rehabilitation Services, said program officials had hoped to start at Chesapeake next year, but company officials pushed to start sooner.

Chesapeake embarked on a modified pilot program earlier this year.

Jacobs said she hopes the program will expand in August to 12 interns, making Chesapeake's the largest such program in the state.

"We have plenty of jobs," she said.

Jacobs said she knew the internship was a success in its first week.

"We got good feedback from the very beginning," she said.

Job coach Joe Murray, who works with the in-

terns to ensure they can handle their duties at Chesapeake, said he gets stopped a couple of times to week by company employees with a story to tell about their experience with the interns.

"This company has just been fabulous," he said. "It's made my job easier."

His job is coordinating the needs of the interns under his guidance and their employer.

"The big thing is to treat them just like they would any Chesapeake employee," Murray said. "The idea is to see the person, not the disability."

Landon Dean, who works in Chesapeake's fitness center, said intern Michael Lofties was a good fit there because of his positive attitude and attention to detail.

"We couldn't have hand-picked anyone better," Dean said.

Now many departments at Chesapeake are interested in having the interns in the future.

Jacobs said she expects Chesapeake to offer a full-time job to at least one of the current interns.

"I think that's a huge success," she said.