

Former psychiatric patient learning basic work skills

By BEN DUMMETT
The Herald

Acton resident, Tom White, 27, likes his job.

When asked what he was doing before the North Halton Work Program (NHWP) opened in Acton in February, Mr. White said, "I was just waiting for it to open."

The NHWP is a form of rehabilitation for Georgetown, Acton and Milton former psychiatric patients that involves them in a "normalized work environment," said the program's manager, Anita Lloyd.

The program operates out of the Beardmore complex and is run in a similar way to any other type of factor operation, explained Ms. Lloyd. The purpose is to teach the participants basic work skills such as punctuality, how to interact with co-workers and supervisors and how to adapt from one type of job to another, she said.

The difference between the NHWP and a factor operation is that, Ms. Lloyd as an employer, is more forgiving than "a real employer," and the program employees set their own work pace. This translates into five hours per day work for each employee.

It's the ability to set his own pace that Mr. White especially appreciates about the job.

As one of the first 10 who joined the program - there are now 22 - Mr. White said, he "is trying to get a (work) pace that he can keep up and it's working."

"The hours (he works 23 hours a week) are something I can put up with and make it through the day," said Mr. White.

One of Mr. White's favorite jobs is rolling gift wrap and then shrink-wrapping it using a specialized machine. "I like electrical and mechanical work," he said.

If he could improve the program, Mr. White said he would like it if there were welding and forging equipment. At the same time he had some reservations about taking on more complex work, saying, "the more complex the work, the more hours I'd have to work."

"I like to think about the job for half of the time and then do it for the other half of the time," he said.

Mr. White hopes to get a full time job in the future, working with cars.

To date, Mr. White explained, he is learning about money and on what not to spend it on. "Before I'd be spending everything I could get my hands on."

Ms. Lloyd called Mr. White a very good employee because he works hard and has long-term goals.

But with a lot of the employees, motivation is a big problem, she said. "Some have come a little way (to being completely dependable workers) while others function in cycles."

For a couple of months they'll do well but then they will be less dependable for the next few months, she explained. But that's "the nature of their illness."

The majority of employees are schizophrenic or suffer from either paranoia, depression or a personality disorder. In this sense, Ms. Lloyd said, success for one patient could be graduating from the program to a regular job while for another it could be just getting into work regularly. So far none of those who might work outside the program are ready, said Ms. Lloyd.

On a good day, 11 of the 22 employees will show up to work.

said Ms. Lloyd. That means if there is a large order to fill, it can become "a real challenge."

"Although our customers realize the program has a different population, they're in business so they still want everything done yesterday," said Ms. Lloyd.

The program is currently doing work for DRG Stationary in Georgetown, Purity Life Health Products in Acton and the Brampton company, Rieke.

Most of the contracts are for light assembling and packaging, said Ms. Lloyd.

Ms. Lloyd acknowledged that the program isn't for all former psychiatric patients. Those who participate have been recommended by either a psychiatrist or hospital. The program could handle 30 employees but part of the problem is that many patients don't have transportation to Acton.

In explaining why most of the employees reside in Acton, Ms. Lloyd said, possible eligible patients living in Georgetown and Milton don't have adequate access to transportation. Ms. Lloyd said she sees no solution on the horizon.

The NHWP is one of three in Halton Region. The other two are in Burlington and Oakville.



Acton resident Tom White, (above), is one of 22 former psychiatric patients currently participating in the North Halton Work Program in Acton. The program is meant to teach its participants how to work in a normal environment. Mr. White is seen here operating the shrink wrapping machine to wrap Christmas paper. (Herald photo)

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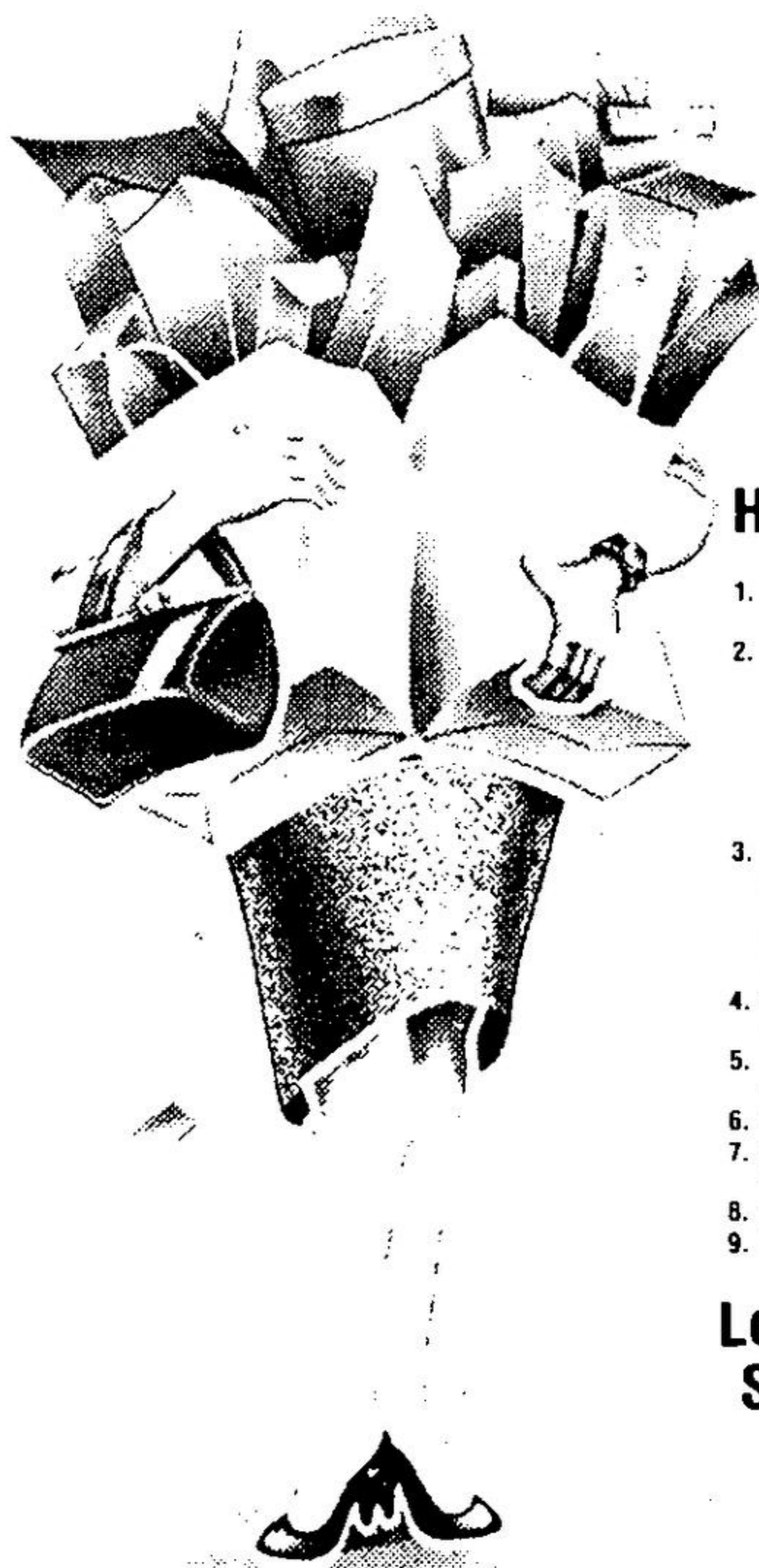


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