

MSU grad Don Lavin makes a career out of helping people

Rising to the challenge

By Robb Murray, Free Press Staff Writer [published in The Free Press, Mankato]

That Don Lavin, he's a real do-gooder.

Check it out: The Minnesota State University grad is a big shot at Rise, a nonprofit group that helps people with disabilities find jobs or find ways to become independent. Not a bad gig for a New Jersey boy who came here, basically, on a whim.

Good thing, though. He says his MSU days were a great time, and he met the "love of his life" here. And he left, he says, with a solid education and foundation for success.

Q: Tell us a little bit about what you do at Rise and why you do it.

A: Rise is a private, not-for-profit corporation with 17 locations in the Twin Cities and central Minnesota. Our organization's mission is to support people with disabilities and other barriers in obtaining employment, economic stability and self-dependency. Rise serves more than 3,000 people a year on an annual budget of more than \$22 million.

As vice president, I am responsible for the design, operations, and evaluation of programs that enable people with disabilities to find and maintain successful employment. This includes the provision of career planning, vocational assessment, job training, job placement and on-the-job supports for individuals with significant disabilities. This may also include training and technical support for employers so their businesses can increase internal capacities for recruiting, hiring, training, and supporting their employees with disabilities. In sum, Rise serves the overlapping needs of employers and people with disabilities. Each of these customer groups get measurable benefits from the work we do.

Q: What's the most rewarding part of your job?

A: Most Americans don't realize that people with disabilities are the single largest minority population in the United States. The U.S. Bureau of Census and Statistics reports 54 million are living with some level of disability in our country. The personal, social, and economic impacts of living with a disability can be staggering.

To illustrate my point, numerous studies report a national unemployment rate of 70-80 percent for people with significant disabilities. To me, this is totally unacceptable and a complete waste of human potential. For this reason, the most rewarding part of my job is personally witnessing the changes that result in the lives of people with disabilities when they become an active part of our community's workforce. I also find it exciting to see the permanent changes that occur in the workplace when employers realize that hiring people with disabilities isn't rocket science. It's just good business.

Q: Why did you choose MSU?

A: Gee, this is a long and weird story about a "Jersey boy" who makes this improbable journey to Mankato, Minnesota. I wish I could say I conducted hard and rigorous research in selecting MSU. Suffice it to say that I was looking for an adventure away from the east coast and my high school guidance counselor suggested I consider the possibility of going to college in the Midwest. A chance meeting with an old buddy during my senior year in high school was the deciding factor. This casual acquaintance of mine was going to college out here and offered to drop off my application at the admissions office. I guess coming to MSU was my destiny.

Q: Ever run into Springsteen on any of those Jersey backstreets?

A: No, I never hung out with Springsteen because I was busy going to school here!

Q: Fondest memory of your days at MSU?

A: Well, I met the "love of my life" at MSU and have fond memories of our early days together. Colleen and I will be married for 30 years this August, and we have raised three beautiful daughters. So, not only did I get a solid education and foundation for my career, just being at MSU triggered important beginnings in my personal life. Hey, not even Harvard or Yale can promise and deliver these kinds of results.

Q: What do you think is MSU's greatest asset?

A: MSU offered a friendly, welcoming, and stimulating environment for learning. I was this young outsider from New Jersey who talked "funny," but I always felt right at home with MSU's faculty, students and the surrounding community in Mankato. If I had the opportunity to do it all over again, I would do it all over again. Honestly.