

Working her way past the voices

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Most of the state workers who get their mail delivered by Amy Schreck don't know the secret she's hiding from them.

She does her best just to smile and to remember where their desks are.

The schizophrenia that disrupts her ability to concentrate isn't obvious to anyone.

Schreck has a job through a partnership that offers supportive job training for people living with mental illness, and in turn saves the state of Iowa more than \$15,000 a year.

Constant voices make Schreck's thoughts seem as if she's in a crowded restaurant with adults and children talking to her all at once. If that's not enough to steal her focus, the voices are interrupted occasionally by sound: screeching metal, hard rock music, loud banging.

For a recent six-year period, Schreck was unemployed and depressed.

"I was just being a vegetable on the couch," said Schreck, 38, of Urbandale. "I couldn't even read because of my voices." Ten months ago, Schreck entered a transitional employment program. The Iowa Finance Authority, a state agency, hires people to perform clerical jobs from Passageway, a Des Moines nonprofit rehabilitation organization.

The National Employment Expansion Project hailed the partnership at its conference in Washington, D.C., last month for saving taxpayers money and for helping people who have had trouble getting or holding employment elsewhere.

To the finance authority staff, Schreck is just "someone who says hello and delivers your mail properly," said Ron Gilbert, a Passageway supervisor. But Gilbert knows that Schreck was a high achiever before her diagnosis at age 25.

She was an outstanding athlete at Valley High School in West Des Moines, a first-chair violist who made it to the all-state orchestra competition four times and a member of the National Honor Society, he said.

Schreck said she decided to become a clinical psychiatrist long before any symptoms of mental illness surfaced. While living in Chicago, where she intended to go to graduate school, she had a psychotic breakdown. She was working two stressful jobs - one at a grocery store headquarters by day and one caring for a quadriplegic man at night. Soft voices began suddenly. By the time she got to the hospital, they were so loud she couldn't understand what medical workers were saying to her.

"I just felt like I was insane," she said. "And no one could help me."



RODNEY WHITE/THE REGISTER

Amy Schreck makes afternoon mail rounds at the Iowa Finance Authority on April 1. The state agency hires people from Passageway, a Des Moines nonprofit rehabilitation organization that offers job training for people like Schreck who are living with mental illness.

About Schreck's illness

Schizophrenia is a chronic, severe and disabling brain disorder that affects about 1 percent of the U.S. population age 18 and older in a given year, according to the National Institute of Mental Health. People with schizophrenia sometimes hear voices others don't hear, believe that others are broadcasting their thoughts to the world, or become convinced that others are plotting to harm them. These experiences can make them fearful and withdrawn, and cause difficulties when they try to have relationships.

How it works

PARTNERSHIP: The Iowa Finance Authority hires people from Passageway, a nonprofit rehabilitation program for Iowans living with the effects of mental illness, to do clerical jobs. It saves the state money and offers supportive job training for people who have had trouble getting or holding employment elsewhere.

SAVINGS: The Passageway workers save finance authority staff 40 hours of work each week. The state saves about \$16,550 a year, said IFA spokeswoman Shawna Lode. Also, Passageway workers have scanned 1,284 boxes of documents that were once in rental storage. That saves the state about \$2,800 in annual storage fees, and the papers are now accessible electronically.

RECOGNITION: The finance authority and Passageway recently received national recognition in Washington, D.C., for their partnership. Eleven Passageway members have done clerical work at IFA.

Schreck never made it to grad school.

After several weeks, she walked out of Loyola University Medical Center with prescriptions for drugs that didn't stop the voices. Drinking and illegal drugs weren't a solution either, she found.

Her ability to be a reliable employee vanished. Ironically, she was once a supervisor who guided mentally retarded workers in sorting mail. Some aspects of schizophrenia are worse than not being able to think clearly, she said.

"It's being a let-down to your family. And seeing other people succeed and seeing myself fail," she said. "The dreams I had in high school and in college, I know I'm not going to reach those goals."

She compares herself to her siblings: a human resources manager, a restaurant manager and a headhunter, all of whom have big houses and many cars. But for Schreck, the worlds of employment, friendship, family and education have long seemed undoable.

Yes, the voices have told her to kill herself. On one occasion, in 1995, she obeyed.

She downed 63 sleeping pills and sagged onto the couch. When the telephone rang, she answered it. It was her mother calling to greet her on Christmas Eve. Her stomach was pumped, and she lived.

The job opportunity at the Iowa Finance Authority, an agency that administers affordable housing and financing programs, made Schreck extremely nervous. Her short-term memory is miserable, she said.

"I wanted something I didn't have to think about all that much," Schreck said.

Sorting, delivering, collecting and stamping mail seemed ideal, but she was fearful she'd make mistakes.

She deals with mail for 85 state workers, opening letters that contain legal documents, checks and applications for programs with deadlines. The mail has to be time-stamped, sometimes on every page. She has to know when an envelope is addressed to one person, but it really has to go to another. It can't sit on the wrong desk for two days. Human resources manager Christine Wetzler said Schreck was reserved at first and avoided eye contact.

She got three copies of the rules, and posted sticky notes everywhere.

After 10 months of work, she has blossomed. "It will be hard to see her go," Wetzler said.

Passageway rotates new people into the finance authority jobs every six to nine months. Schreck's time there ends this week.

The program began in 2006, after IFA moved into a new office and mail could no longer be placed in individual staff mailboxes, said spokeswoman Shawna Lode. Two Passageway members did so well delivering the mail to each employee's desk twice a day that the finance authority hired two more to scan documents for digital storage. Gilbert, the Passageway supervisor, is trained to do the jobs, too. If someone can't come to work because of doctor's appointments or a bad mental health day, he can step in.

"That's a comfort to know someone will cover their absences," he said. "If they stumble, we try to break that cycle of: 'Oh, I messed up again. I'll just give up.'"

Schreck said after all her worrying, the worst mistake she made at the finance authority was to leave for the day without delivering some packages at the bottom of a cart that she'd forgotten about.

Her confidence has spiked. She's so successful it's easy to think she could do more, Gilbert said.

But Schreck knows to keep it simple. There's a reason she has no children. She can't "be there 100 percent" for a child if she's sometimes off in space listening to the voices in her brain, or if she has to be hospitalized.

"Most days I'm afraid to go get my own mail or answer the phone or get the door," she said. "I basically feel like I'm barely existing."

Schreck's co-workers at the Iowa Finance Authority said they will miss her when she "graduates" this week. Schreck said she doesn't know what her future holds, but she's hoping to find another clerical job.