



**Amalia Duarte**  
**Public Relations Director**  
ECLC of NJ  
Tel: 973-635-1705 X26  
Cell: (973-902-8390)  
E-mail: [aduarte@eclcofnj.org](mailto:aduarte@eclcofnj.org)

## **Cafeteria Worker with Special Needs is Making the Grade at Summit's Middle School**

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**CHATHAM, N.J.** – At Summit's middle school, cafeteria worker Dominick Monteleone serves up smiles every day to the kitchen crew as well as to students and teachers. "Everybody just loves him," said Cafeteria Manager Mike Triplet of Springfield. "He teaches us something every day."

On the job, Monteleone, 24, of Union, is teaching everyone about the capabilities of people on the autism spectrum, an especially timely message during October, which is National Disability Employment Awareness Month (NDEAM). He has worked at the cafeteria, operated by Pomptonian Food Service, since graduating in 2009 from ECLC of New Jersey's special needs school in Chatham. Initially, he was hired as a dishwasher but has taken on many other duties over the years, including re-stocking the beverage coolers, taking out recycling, putting away dishes, making pudding cups and other odd jobs, as they come up.

The job was a good fit right from the start. "I have been working with Dominick for the past three years, and it has been amazing to see him grow within his position," said his employment specialist, who helped him land the job, Maggie McCourt of Community Personnel Services (CPS) in Chatham. "His positive attitude and appreciation of life and his work have a way of influencing everyone around him."

As his employment specialist, McCourt visits Monteleone monthly and gives him on-the-job support. When he was first hired, she provided intensive job coaching in the cafeteria, until he was comfortable performing his tasks independently.

Monteleone works part-time, using New Jersey's Access Link (a public transportation system for people with disabilities) to get to work from his home in Union. He is an eager, upbeat employee who jumps right in to any task and wants to stay busy. "I like working here. I like washing dishes. I like taking trays out of the oven. I like seeing the kids get their lunch," said Monteleone on a recent Monday morning, as he put bottles of water and other drinks into a cooler. "I enjoy this. I never thought about getting another job."

In his leisure time, he enjoys spending time with his family, taking his niece for walks with his dad and enrolling in evening classes at his old school. Right now, he is taking yoga. "It's good exercise," he said.

“It’s terrific to see him progress and evolve,” said Tripet. “When I first came here two years ago, he was quiet and not as confident. Now, if a student asks him for something, he gets it on his own. He doesn’t need to ask someone else for direction. He gives us the news headlines every morning!”

“Dominick’s success is a tribute to his hard work and also to the wonderful support from his employment specialist and employer,” added CPS Director, Alison Chernela.

The October awareness campaign is meant to highlight the accomplishments of workers like Monteleone and break down stereotypes about hiring people with disabilities. It was established by Congress in 1945 as “National Employ the Physically Handicapped Week.” In 1962, the word “physically” was removed to acknowledge the employment needs and contributions of individuals with all types of disabilities. And, in 1988, Congress expanded the week to a month and changed the name to “National Disability Employment Awareness Month.”

These are difficult times for anyone to find a job, and CPS employment specialists are seeing increased competition for jobs. Yet, they still manage to successfully place nearly all of their clients – 93 percent -- in meaningful positions.

“We are seeing candidates, with higher-level credentials, who probably wouldn’t have applied for these jobs before now competing with our clients,” said McCourt. “But our clients bring more than just credentials to the table. Like Dominick, they have excellent work habits, true dedication and a willingness to do whatever it takes on the job.”

Tripet would agree. “He works hard and is great to have around,” he said. “I wouldn’t trade him for any other employee.”

### **About CPS**

CPS was established in 1995 by ECLC of New Jersey to help their graduating students and other adult clients find meaningful employment. Based on their skills, abilities and interests, students sample jobs prior to graduation with the goal of identifying the best match. For students who may not be ready for employment, the CPS staff arranges tours of programs and helps clients navigate through the maze of state and federal agencies to access aid, services and transportation.

Clients work for dozens of employers, including Acme Markets of Randolph, the Home Depot in Parsippany, Ashland Chemical of Chatham, Marshalls of Paramus, Morris View Nursing Home in Morristown, Panera Bread in Florham Park, Sears of Rockaway and Shop-Rite of Parsippany. They do everything from driving forklifts to corralling shopping carts in parking lots to stocking shelves. Learn more about CPS at <http://www.cpsofnj.org>.

### **About ECLC**

Founded in 1970, ECLC of New Jersey offers lifelong support and services – education, employment and enrichment – to people with special needs. The nonprofit has grown from a small, early-intervention program into a comprehensive network of nonprofit agencies serving nearly 700 people with special needs, including autism, Down syndrome, severe learning and/or language disabilities or multiple disabilities. ECLC runs schools, for students ages 5-21, in Ho-Ho-Kus and Chatham, and for adults with special needs, offers jobs through CPS and day and evening programs at its P.R.I.D.E. Centers in Chatham and Paramus. Meanwhile, the ECLC Foundation supplements funding for all entities and

supports afterschool activities, respite weekends (overnights), alumni programs, adult services and capital projects. Learn more about ECLC at [www.eclcofnj.org](http://www.eclcofnj.org).