

# GOOD DEED

## Disabled grads offered job help

Bridges program gives many a 'steppingstone to greater possibilities'

By **TY A. ALLISON**

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Doray Atkins was born with cerebral palsy. The North Dallas 20-year-old lives in a one-bedroom apartment, walks three blocks to a DART station, and rides a bus to her full-time job at the Dallas Renaissance Hotel, where she works as a "delighted to serve you agent."

She got the job through the Marriott Foundation's "Bridges ... from school to work" program, which helps high school students with disabilities find employment.



**Doray Atkins**

"Bridges gives a kid with a disability a chance to expand and see what the real world is like," said Ms. Atkins, whose job includes checking reservations, handling room commendations and ensuring that accounts are managed properly.

"It gives you hope, boosts your confidence, and it's a steppingstone to greater possibilities."

Started in 1989, Bridges was launched in partnership with the Dallas Independent School District in November 2005 and fosters the employment of young people with disabilities as they leave high school, while helping local employers meet their workforce needs.

Since 2005, 49 Dallas businesses have employed 98 Bridges students, said Robert Mollard, director of the Dallas Bridges program.

A total of 120 students have enrolled in the program, meaning that 82 percent of Dallas' Bridges students have had employment success, he said.

"I think Bridges is really important because it gives an underserved portion of youth some much-needed work experience," Mr. Mollard said. "We don't focus on their weaknesses, we focus on their strengths. I like to think of us as a nonprofit temp agency. We are another resource for em-

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ployers to get entry level employees."

Sometimes employers come to the Bridges program to find young entry-level employees, he said.

"I think they see value in our services because they know we have their bottom line in mind," Mr. Mollard said. "We have prescreened all of these young people, and we know their skills. The students are trained on how to interview, write resumes, fill out a job applications and perform other basic job readiness skills."

Corey Golomb, coordinator of special education, secondary curriculum and instruction for DISD, said the collaboration with the Marriott Foundation is vital to help students post-graduation.

"The Bridges program is an extension of the work we do with special needs students who are about to graduate," Ms. Golomb said. "After students graduate, they are not eligible for our services, so the Marriott Foundation can provide ongoing follow-up support that is crucial for our students."

By month's end, Ms. Atkins will have completed her first nine months at the Renaissance. She plans to attend a community college and university in the area.

"My degree will be in the social service field," she said. "I want to work with youth. I want kids with disabilities to know their lives are limitless, depending on their attitude. I also want kids without disabilities to be knowledgeable about what it's like to have a disability."

The cost of living and other issues caused Ms. Atkins to move to Dallas from San Francisco, where she lived for 18 years. She has relatives and friends who live in surrounding cities.

The Bridges program has remained a constant support in her transition from the West Coast.

"No matter what you throw at me, I am not going to stop," Ms. Atkins said. "Just because you have a disability doesn't mean it's the end of the world. You can make it, no matter how major the disability may be."