

## The City and School District expand opportunities for students with disabilities



*The City held a "meet and greet" for its first Project SEARCH intern, Ben Warren, when he began his role in March 2022.*

In March 2022, the City of River Falls became the first local government in Wisconsin to host a Project SEARCH intern when it welcomed Ben Warren to its staff.

Project SEARCH, developed at Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center in 1996, is a program that provides young adults with disabilities training and career exploration to help them gain competitive employment. Participating students have the opportunity to complete a workforce alternative for their last year of high school, completing rotations at three local workplaces.

The School District of River Falls is an education partner with Project SEARCH, facilitating work placements and instruction for qualifying students in the River Falls area. Before partnering with the City, the School District worked with River Falls Area Hospital as its only placement site.

However, when Natasha Herum, Project SEARCH Instructor for the School District of River Falls, reached out to Mayor Dan Toland in spring 2021 to ask if he would serve as a commencement speaker at the program's graduation ceremony, Mayor Toland saw an opportunity.

"Before agreeing to speak, I wanted to meet with the kids and learn more about the program," Mayor Toland explained. "We set up some time and talked about what I do, what they do, and where they see themselves going, and I was amazed at how focused they were. They knew exactly what they wanted, even at such a young age when most of us have no idea. It was clear that having one of these students at City Hall would be a mutually beneficial experience."

Herum and the School District were immediately excited by the possibility of a partnership. Herum even had a student, Warren, in mind for a rotation at the City. City staff, led by Assistant to the City Administrator Jennifer Smith, worked closely with Herum to design a work assignment that would meet Warren's abilities and needs and allow him to expand his skills.

Smith served as Warren's onsite supervisor, ensuring he had the resources he needed to succeed. Warren's workday at City Hall typically began with basic custodial services to help maintain the building's physical spaces. However, his primary role was to prepare election materials, including absentee ballots. Over the course of his rotation, Warren successfully prepared thousands of mailings for upcoming elections.



*Ben Warren (middle) is the first Project SEARCH intern to work at the City of River Falls. Coworkers Tyler Galde (left) and Jackie Hanson (right) became Warren's fast friends.*

In addition to allowing students to develop new technical skills, Project SEARCH provides students the integral opportunity to expand their social skills and confidence in relationship building.

"I just love working here," Warren said. "When I came here my first time, I met Jennifer and my new people and now we are friends, and that's a new experience for me."

Warren's desk at City Hall was just around the corner from Tyler Galde, Planning and Engineering Technician, and Jackie Hanson, Deputy City Clerk. The three became fast friends, and Galde and Hanson soon learned they'd have to stay on their toes around their quick and witty new coworker.

"My favorite part was working with Tom and Jackie, because they're great to talk with," Warren said. "It was more than time to get my work done."

"Ben calls Tyler 'Tom,'" Smith explained.

"Because he looks like Tom Holland," Warren said. "Should we tell her about the note?" He grinned.

“Ben left a note for me to kick Tom out of the office,” Smith said with a laugh. “I don’t know why we would kick a superhero out of the office! I think we want to keep the superheroes close, right?”

While Warren’s rotation at City Hall ended in May 2022, he was invited to stay on through the summer as a seasonal office technician. “It’s not typical for a Project SEARCH intern to be hired by the organization where they complete their internship,” Smith said, “but due to the positive impact Ben had on the organization, as well as the volume of work available this election period, it just worked out.”



*Warren was excited to get settled in his new dorm room at Bethel University, where he is working toward a Certificate of Applied Studies. Photo courtesy of Diane Warren.*

In August 2022, after completing his temporary summer work with the City, Warren enrolled at Bethel University, where he will spend two years working toward a Certificate of Applied Studies.

“Having Ben as our first Project SEARCH intern was a fantastic experience,” Smith

said. "He was able to be flexible and learn so many new things with us. He really opened the door for us to be able to build this relationship with Project SEARCH and the School District into something lasting and meaningful."

This fall, the City looks forward to hosting two new Project SEARCH interns, who will complete work at City Hall, the Library, and Public Works.

"We are so excited about our new partnership with the City of River Falls," Natasha Herum, Project SEARCH Instructor for the School District of River Falls, said. "In addition to providing opportunities for career exploration in new areas, the placements at the City allow us to serve more individuals and provide deeper, more meaningful experiences. What we are most excited about, however, is the way in which the City has embraced our program and our interns. By using inclusive practices and providing a positive work environment, Project SEARCH interns feel welcomed and valued at the City of River Falls."

"At the City, we are committed to providing opportunity for people from all backgrounds and life experiences," Mayor Toland said. "We're grateful for the outstanding work the School District is doing with Project SEARCH and for the opportunity to take part. We are pleased to have been able to provide some tools to help Ben expand his skills and work experience, but we're equally grateful to have had his unique outlook and perspectives to help us grow."