



Ferndale Supported Living Welcomes Aaron!



As a long-established recipient of Cascade Connections' Vocational Services, Aaron is no stranger to our organization. Excitingly, earlier this year, our Supported Living department in Ferndale welcomed him with open arms. Aaron now resides in a beautiful home with his housemate and has been growing into his new environment with a smile on his face ever since. Hailing from Texas, Aaron constantly delights others with his southern charm and considerably kind demeanor. Aaron has impressed



his staff and housemate with his affinity for puzzle solving and is appreciated for his considerate nature and surprising sense of humor.

When Aaron isn't working at Justesen Industries, he enjoys hosting friends in his home and attending community events - particularly anything sports

related. Aaron regularly expresses his desire to participate in events related to the disability community in some capacity. Aaron listed "Out of the Ashes" and "Special Olympics" as two examples of community events he enjoys that make him feel connected to others living with disabilities. As the seasons turn, Aaron has also enjoyed getting outside and enjoying all of the beauty Whatcom County has to offer.

When asked what he likes most about his new home, Aaron said he likes the "safety rules" that are in place and upheld with the help of staff. Aaron described "feeling safe" as a client of Cascade Connections knowing there were regular "safety checks and fire drills and all that." Aaron also said



he has enjoyed playing games with his housemate and being able to anticipate who would be working with him that day due to the visual schedule aids maintained by Cascade Connections staff.

We are all excited to continue to get to know Aaron and help him facilitate countless new memories and



experiences! With his positive attitude and willingness to engage with the community and his peers, Aaron is thriving in his new living situation. His passion for helping out, whether it be simply around the home or



by volunteering to help coach for the Special Olympics, truly showcases his commitment to making meaningful connections and feeling a sense of belonging.

Everyone who has the pleasure of meeting Aaron instantly

recognizes his warm personality and genuine compassion. As he continues to conquer puzzles and bring laughter to those around him, Aaron exemplifies resilience and a zest for life that inspires all who know him.

Ferndale Supported Living Continues to Expand!

Ferndale Supported Living officially began serving clients in the summer of 2024, welcoming James and Kyle to a newly renovated home in an established Ferndale neighborhood.

Fast forward one year and Ferndale Supported Living is now serving six total clients in three different households. Ferndale's success is a dream come true for Area Manager, Nikki, who knew there was a lot of room for growth in the area. We are excited to share the story of Aaron, who recently moved to Ferndale, and catch up with Kyle, who continues to thrive with Ferndale Supported Living.

Kyle Continues to Thrive in Ferndale Supported Living



Kyle is a charismatic young man who joined our Ferndale Supported Living community in April of 2024. Recently, Cascade Connections' Creative/Marketing team caught up with Kyle and Ferndale Assistant Site Manager, Avery to learn what Kyle has been up to since he started receiving our Supported Living services last year.

As you may recall from when we introduced Kyle in our Spring 2024 newsletter, Kyle grew up in the area and has friends and acquaintances all over the County. As Kyle puts it, "Everybody knows me, baby!" Kyle is a well-known regular at many Ferndale establishments and some his favorite hang-outs include Mugshots Espresso, Chihuahua,

and Barb's Pies and Pastries, where Kyle says you can get the best donuts in town.

Kyle reports that he really enjoys the increased freedom that Supported Living affords him. He says the staff are "awesome", and he appreciates the fact that "I can go places whenever I want." Kyle also likes that the staff support him in preparing his favorite foods, which include pizza, hamburgers, steak, and BBQ ribs. Kyle especially enjoys that he has more space in his new house and "can listen to music whenever I want." He says he loves to play AC/DC and Taylor Swift, and so far, the neighbors haven't objected!

Typically, when a new client joins Cascade Connections' Supported Living program, there is a lot of focus on community integration. However, thanks to Kyle's extensive connections in the community, his support team is able to focus on helping Kyle to maintain his existing relationships, such as with his parents, who live within walking distance of his



home. He also loves spending time with his young nephew, who was born in April of 2024.

Of course, Kyle has also built several new relationships over the last year. You might remember, when Kyle joined our program, he lived with James. James recently relocated to another Supported Living site in Ferndale, so James and Kyle are now enjoying the next stage of their friendship. According to Ferndale Assistant Site Manager, Avery, "In some ways Kyle and James' relationship is even stronger now that they are no longer living together."

Another relationship he has developed is with his new roommate, Tyler, who recently joined Cascade Connections Supported Living program. Kyle and Tyler enjoy a healthy, mature dynamic and Kyle refers to the two of them as "the Birch Street Boys"! They knew each other before becoming



roommates, having played on the same Special Olympics T-Ball team.

As far as Kyle's Vocational pursuits are concerned, he continues to enjoy his job at Armory Fitness where he works twice a week on Mondays and Fridays. His responsibilities include cleaning and maintaining equipment. Kyle recently had a very positive employment review and is now working toward gaining more independence at work. He has expressed satisfaction with his current work schedule. From time to time, he still works with his father, who is a commercial fisherman.

For fun, Kyle continues to enjoy seeing live music, especially Hell's Belles, the world famous all-female AC/DC cover band based out of Seattle. Avery noted, "Kyle pursues his interests tenaciously, and supporting him through his favorite activities is an absolute pleasure for his staff. Kyle makes the most of every second doing his favorite things, and he spreads his enthusiasm to everyone else attending."

We are excited to support Kyle as he continues to gain independence and pursue his dreams.

Group Pre-ETS Program Prepares Students with Disabilities for the Workplace



Last fall Cascade Connections quietly introduced a new program serving Whatcom County students enrolled in the Community Transitions Program. The program, called

Group Pre-Employment Transitions Services (Group Pre-ETS) is designed to prepare students with disabilities for the workplace. Throughout the school year, students participated in weekly sessions where they developed resumes, practiced interviewing, and explored potential employment opportunities. The curriculum also included lessons on financial management and self-advocacy, intended to help students understand their rights in the workplace.

Group Pre-ETS is a collaboration between Cascade

Connections' Vocational Services Department, the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (DVR), the Center for Independence (CFI) and five local high schools - Ferndale, Meridian, Lynden, Mt. Baker, and Blaine. Gregg Hill, longtime Cascade Connections employee, served as the Group Pre-ETS Coordinator, working with teachers and paraeducators to coordinate lessons for over 65 students enrolled in the program.

Each week students gathered from their respective high schools, often at the WECU Educational Center in Ferndale, and learned about the diverse workplace opportunities available to them. Students also took interest tests to help determine what careers might best suit them. From there, workplace learning,



job shadowing and even internships were coordinated which allowed students more hands-on experience. These on-the-job learning opportunities helped to build resumes, grow confidence and skills, and prepare students for long-term employment.

According to Vocational Services Administrator, Kristin Nguyen, “the sooner you start talking about what your future will look like, the more successful you’ll be in finding the jobs that you want. We encourage high school students to get jobs and experience while they’re in school,

but people with disabilities have often been left out of that.”

The students’ year-long preparation culminated in mock interviews, held at the Cascade Connections Administrative Offices in Ferndale in May. These mock interviews allowed the students an opportunity

to experience some real-world scenarios and practice their newly acquired skills in a new environment.

In June, the students gathered for an end-of-year celebration and pizza party. The event was kicked off by a guest speaker, a former group Pre-ETS student and current Cascade Connections customer, Caelan, who

works at Park Bowl in Bellingham. Caelan provided a brief overview of his life after school and talked about some of his personal goals for the future. Afterward he answered questions from the audience. Group Pre-ETS coordinator Gregg then addressed the group with a “Year in Review” detailing all the progress the students had made over the course of the program. Finally, each participant was given a certificate of completion.

While Group Pre-ETS is designed to support students with disabilities as they venture into the workplace, families and guardians are often inspired by the growth and independence they observe in their son or daughter. One parent remarked, “I’m super excited for my son to continue to work with your program and so thankful for all you do with youth services.”

Cascade Connections started the Group Pre-ETS program hoping to increase students’ engagement in adult employment services. Statistically, only 51% of students leaving the Community Transitions program were receiving on-going employment services after finishing school. This statistic is staggering. Cascade Connections wanted to do something about it and we did. At the conclusion of this year, we have seen a significant increase in students leaving school connected to the support they need and on the road to a bright future. Group Pre-ETS offers students valuable opportunities, education, and advocacy, helping them access employment services that will allow them thrive in the workplace as adults.

The Rome Bakery and Market is Selected as Employer of the Quarter for Spring 2025



You may have heard of Rome Bakery and Market, located on Mount Baker Highway. Known for over 100 years as the Rome Store, the Market has recently made the name switch to Rome Bakery and Market. The establishment has long been a pillar in the East Whatcom Community. It’s more than just a corner store, the Market serves artisan pizza, delicious

pastries, quality coffee and beer on tap, in addition to offering your typical grocery items. The Rome Bakery and Market is also notable because they have been selected as Cascade Connections’ Employer of the Quarter for Spring of 2025. Congratulations Rome Bakery and Market!

The Rome Bakery and Market began collaborating with Cascade Connections in May of 2023 through a Work-Based Learning experience for Jacob, a local high school student enrolled in the Pre-Employment Transitions (Pre-ETS) Program. In August of 2023, the Rome Bakery and Market officially extended a job offer to Jacob, and for the last two years, Jacob has carved out a niche for himself at the store.

Jacob works on Tuesdays and reports his favorite part of his job is connecting with the customers. Andrea, the owner of Rome Bakery and Market, shares, “a fun piece that has evolved as Jacob has become more comfortable here is his enthusiasm for chatting with the customers.” Jacob



has a special interest in garbage collection, and often engages customers with questions about their garbage collection routine. His duties at the Market align with his interests and include washing dishes, taking out recycling and trash, and breaking down cardboard.

According to Andrea, working with Cascade Connections Vocational Services has been a great experience, “Collaborating with the coaches feels like we are all on the same team. They make it clear that yes, they are supporting their client but they’re also here for us. They are incredibly well skilled in communication and it’s truly a joy to work with them.”

Rome Grocery prides itself on being a pillar in the community it serves. It’s not unusual that you’ll stop by and find them hosting a fundraiser for a local cause, whether for the local PTO or marching band. So, working with Cascade Connections Vocational Services also aligns with their values. “We value honesty, hard work, a positive attitude and the understanding that we’re all just humans trying to do our best. Jacob aligns with every one of those

pieces.” Andrea goes on to say, “At first there was a feeling of giving Jacob an opportunity. But he has earned his position, does it well, and I’d love it if he could work everyday.”

For Jacob, working at the Rome Bakery and Market has given him an opportunity to earn

a paycheck. Especially meaningful to Jacob is that he receives a physical check for his wages and not direct deposit. Jacob likes to cash the check and see his earnings. But of course, a job is more than a paycheck. Thanks to his experience at the Rome Bakery and Market, Jacob has learned new skills, built friendships and community, and learned a little more about himself.



Andrea shared that, “The Rome Bakery and Market was built in 1915 and first served as a dance hall. Ten years later, it was rolled up Sand Road by horse and log, to its current location on the corner of Mount Baker Highway and Sand Road. Since then, the little store has changed hands, hired new help, and served the East Whatcom Community.” According to Andrea, the Rome Bakery and Market “draws the right people, and always has.” Cascade Connections is honored to be among those drawn to the market.

If you find yourself on Mount Baker Highway, be sure to make a stop at the Market, you can grab a slice of pizza or a pastry. And if it’s a Tuesday, you just might run into Jacob!

Lan Totten: A Legacy of Advocacy and Quality Services



For 29 action-packed years, Lan Totten has been a vital force in advancing employment services and disability advocacy through her work with the Vocational Services Department at Cascade Connections. This past April marked a new chapter in Lan’s journey, as she thoughtfully transitioned from her long-held role as

Program Manager into semi-retirement—continuing her passion for the field by taking on a part-time caseload, supporting individuals through the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (DVR), with a primary focus on Independent Living (IL) skills.

Lan’s career has been nothing short of inspiring. In June 2023, her tremendous contributions were recognized when she was nominated for the Whatcom Women in Business (WWIB) Community Legacy Award. This nomination highlighted her business acumen, leadership, professionalism, mentorship, and deep-rooted community



leadership at the time of nomination, Lan stood out as a deeply deserving candidate.

Lan's journey at Cascade Connections began as a job coach, leading a custodial crew of workers with disabilities. Through dedication and a deep passion for the work, she grew into the role of Employment Specialist and later became Program Manager. In her leadership role, she supported services for individuals through DVR and Foundational Community Supports (FCS), cultivating strong partnerships with state agencies and guiding her team to deliver creative, person-centered solutions for each job seeker.

Time and again, Lan has proactively responded to community needs. One example is the job interview workshop she initiated, designed to strengthen the skills of the people we serve. She collaborated with local professionals to host mock interviews—providing participants with invaluable real-world practice and strengthening community ties along the way.



Even in public forums, Lan has remained a passionate advocate. During her WWIB nomination interview, she used the opportunity to educate employers on the benefits of inclusive hiring. As she shared, “According to surveys, the number one objection or concern that employers have is around liability, but in fact, statistics are exactly the opposite... folks with disabilities make fewer L&I claims than do employees without disabilities.”

Lan has shown unwavering resilience and adaptability

in navigating the complexities of social services, government systems, and ever-changing community needs. She has built strong alliances with fellow providers and championed solutions that have made lasting impacts—including life-changing connections for the individuals she supports.



Beyond her professional role, Lan has also volunteered with various community organizations and has been a powerful advocate for individuals experiencing mental health challenges, substance use issues, and homelessness. Her participation in the Whatcom Coalition to End Homelessness brought invaluable insights back to Cascade Connections and helped expand the support available to our customers.

Known for her humility, authenticity, and compassion, Lan has continuously nurtured the growth of others. She has mentored and trained many Employment Specialists, helping them become skilled, thoughtful advocates and effective business partners. Her leadership has empowered many to take on more complex and meaningful roles within our organization.

Lan's commitment to vocational services is rooted in a deep belief in the dignity and value of work. As she reflected in her WWIB interview: “When somebody gets a job, they develop the means to have more control of their own lives – that's what money does for us. And what's more impactful, when folks have a job, they have a place to belong... I've seen people just fill up with confidence and a sense of wellbeing and purpose when they have a place to go in the morning... in fact, I find it true for me as well.”

Now, in her current role as an IL provider, Lan continues to support people in overcoming barriers to employment by offering help with things like independent living skills, managing money, learning how to get around, using assistive technology, and connecting with important community resources.

Cascade Connections Summer Events

Save the Date!

OPEN TO PUBLIC

Fundraising Night @ District Brewing in Ferndale!

Cascade Connections will receive \$1 of every pint sold during the event.

JULY 8
5:30PM

Trivia Night



AUGUST 12
5:30PM

Cornhole Tournament



JULY 17
4PM-7PM

Hamster Art Walk and Roll
@ Barkley Village Green

An Accessible Art Walk!



JULY 17
ALL DAY

MOD Pizza Fundraiser @ Barkley MOD Pizza

MOD will donate 20% of your bill to Cascade Connections! Bring in a flyer or order online (use the fundraiser code, **MODGIVES20**). <https://bit.ly/2025-mod-cascade>



OPEN TO CLIENTS/CUSTOMERS/EMPLOYEES AND THEIR FAMILIES

JULY 6
1PM

Cascade Day with Bellingham Bells
@ Joe Martin Field



AUGUST 23
11AM-2-PM

Annual Picnic @ Pioneer Park



Thank You to Our Donors

Donations from Churches:

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Community Foundation

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Benevity, Environmental Pest Control, Inc., Kroger,
TSE Power Solutions, Community Food Co-op,
Costco, Target, Village Books

Special thanks to the dozens of individuals who have donated since April, 2025!

Please visit us on the web at
cascadeconnections.org
to learn more.

 [cascadeconnections](https://facebook.com/cascadeconnections)  [cascade_connections](https://instagram.com/cascade_connections)



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Summer 2025 Newsletter

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View our current openings here:
bit.ly/cascadejobs

Haggen - 2025 Inspiring Change Together Fundraising Campaign



Haggen is hosting a summer fundraising campaign “Inspiring Change Together” to highlight local programs that support inclusion-focused nonprofits!

Cascade Connections is excited to be a part of this promotion and will benefit from every donation made at the **Ferndale Haggen** register **from July 2 through August 12, 2025.**

Thank you, Haggen, for being such a generous and reliable community partner to Cascade Connections – we are extremely grateful for your support!

Check out Haggen’s website or search **#HaggenHelps** on social media to learn about the many ways Haggen inspires change in local communities.

#HaggenHelps #OpportunitiesForEveryone