Program helps employees better understand work conditions for UAB co-workers with disabilities

Ben Carr was doing his best to give good instructions to co-worker Bobby Barnes, and Barnes did his best to heed Carr’s every word.

“There’s a chair on the right ... OK, we’re going to go through a door on the left ... There’s garbage can to your right.”

Carr was helping Barnes as he tried to navigate this way through the Penthouse of the Administration Building wearing a blindfold and using a walking cane. The exercise was part of a disability-training exercise hosted by the UAB RAVE Program in partnership with the Alabama Department of Rehabilitation Services. The half-day course, titled Understanding Disability, provides the latest information on disability etiquette techniques and politically correct language regarding disabilities. The course also teaches appropriate ways to interact with individuals with visual, hearing and physical impairments in workplace situations and interviews.

The exercise was quite an interesting experience for Barnes.

“This truly gives you a whole new and different perspective,” says Barnes, an employee relations specialist in Human Resources. “Even when Ben said, ‘The wall is on your right,’ in my mind, I was picturing myself running in to it. His instructions were good, but I couldn’t escape having the feeling that I was not in control of what was happening to me.”
More than 20 HR employees participated in a series of simulated disability situations to better understand the work-related difficulties often facing individuals with disabilities.

Participants were encouraged to look at their own biases towards individuals with disabilities, which may unknowingly prevent them from fostering an inclusive workforce, and to begin thinking of the possibilities of working with and hiring individuals with disabilities.

“In the UAB Strategic Plan one of our goals is to create a positive, supportive and diverse environment in which our students, faculty and staff can excel,” says Chief Human Resources Officer Alesia Jones. “This training is just one way that we are doing that. It helps develop appreciation for the value and contributions of a significant segment of our society, while providing unique insight into everyday challenges faced by persons with disabilities. Advancing this perspective throughout the UAB community is essential because it promotes and supports the university’s commitment to equal opportunity in education and employment.”

This session was the second one the RAVE Program has hosted this year, says Sherri Moultrie, HR disability representative and coordinator of the event. In her position with RAVE, Moultrie often contacts recruiters, hiring managers and others in the UAB community to advocate for persons with disabilities.

Moultrie says she attended the disability awareness training offered by the Alabama Department of Rehabilitation Services this past year and was excited about bringing the training to UAB.

“We’ve received positive feedback from attendees and the experiential learning definitely has been a favorite,” Moultrie says.

Employees also took part in several other disability-awareness activities, including those for mobility and speech impairment.

Leslie Dawson, senior vocational rehabilitation counselor with the Alabama Department of Rehabilitation Services, says the role-playing games are a great activity to help
people learn to overcome anxiety from interacting with people with disabilities.

“Part of the training is on etiquette where we teach some of the basic things you need to do to help someone with a visual impairment or somebody who is hearing impaired,” Dawson says. “People want to know, ‘What do I do? How do I interact? When do I offer to help? Am I doing too much to help? What does this person need?’ We give some practical solutions or ways to do that. The training is designed to help people be more at ease and comfortable interacting with different types of disabilities.”

The training also includes the latest information regarding the Americans with Disabilities Act Amendments Act and proposed federal initiatives that soon may be mandated.

“That's another aspect of this that is helpful to me — this training relates to my job,” Barnes says. “I get calls on disability issues, reasonable accommodations and that sort of thing. The law seems to always be changing, so it's good to get a refresher.”

Moultrie says she hopes these training sessions will made available to departments throughout UAB in the near future. “That's certainly our goal,” she says.