



## Employers of the Year: Kalamazoo organization recognizes two companies for hiring people with disabilities

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By **Bryce Hoekenga | Kalamazoo Gazette**

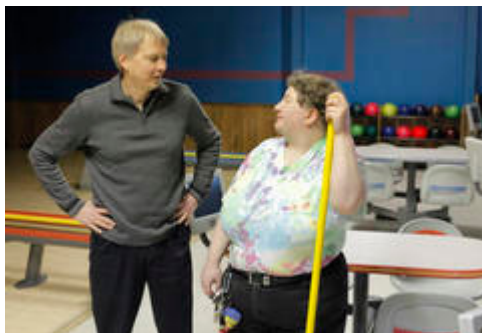


Mark Bugnaski | Kalamazoo Gazette Susan

and Albert Trombley, left, owners of Tromblay Salon in Kalamazoo, pose inside the salon with InterAct’s supervisor of employment services, Tami Young, second from right, and Arius Bell, right, who works at Tromblay. **KALAMAZOO** — Brian Merica believes that employing people who are mentally ill can help them be more active in the community and also prove that they can be good workers.

Merica and his wife, Jill, own Richland Lanes, at 9900 E. D Ave. in Richland, which has won an award for its employment of a person with mental illness. Tromblay Salon, at 627 S. Burdick St. in Kalamazoo, also won the award.

Kalamazoo-based nonprofit organization InterAct of Michigan Inc., which presented the 2009 Employer of the Year Awards to the two businesses in December, uses the awards to recognize Kalamazoo County businesses that hire, train and retain people with mental illness.



**View full size** Mark Bugnaski | Kalamazoo Gazette Brian Merica, owner of

Richland Lanes, left, talks with Karen Keeler at the bowling alley. InterAct helps those with mental illness lead full

and productive lives in the community. Through one of its programs, Action Employment Services, it helps them get and retain full-time, part-time and temporary jobs in the area.

Two of InterAct's clients work at the latest award-winning businesses. Arius Bell has been a maintenance worker at Tromblay Salon since December 2007, and Karen Keeler became a custodian at Richland Lanes last spring.

Both Keeler and Bell work 15 to 20 hours per week. Brian Merica said he supports the hiring of people with mental illnesses for several reasons.

"I believe it gets them out into the community," he said. "It gives them the opportunity to support themselves, and she (Keeler) helps us too."

With a little patience and guidance, Keeler became a good worker, he said. "She does a really nice job."

Albert Trombley, who owns Tromblay Salon with his wife, Susan, said he's pleased with Bell as an employee.

"He's pretty handy and he's pretty versatile," Trombley said. "Arius has really good character and I trust him to be here (at Tromblay) by himself."

Bell during the summer works to keep the salon's grass greener than grass at other area businesses, Trombley said. In the winter, he said, the sidewalks are often the most neatly shoveled in the neighborhood, thanks again to Bell.

Bell said he enjoys working with the Trombleys at their salon.

"Albert and Susan are incredible individuals. They help me out a lot and I appreciate that," he said.

InterAct's executive director, Claudia Wink-Basing, said the agency was started in 1991 and began giving out the Employer of the Year Awards in 1999. InterAct, at 610 S. Burdick St., contracts with Kalamazoo Community Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services.

In 2009, InterAct helped 237 people look for, get and keep jobs at 115 businesses and organizations, including A & L Janitorial Services, Commercial Building Services LLC, Full City Cafe, Labor Ready, Little Caesar's Pizza, McDonald's Restaurants, Meijer Inc., Michigan Rehabilitation Services, Pinto Products Inc., Portage Public Schools, Staybridge Suites, and Stein Mart.