Cotopaxi’s Coffee Cart program

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When students with special needs reach high school, parents, guardians and schools must start planning the future of young people who struggle with a variety of learning disabilities.

For some students at Cotopaxi High School the exploration into life after high school takes the form of the Coffee Cart program.

The program is the creation of Tom and Julie Lang, whose son Gus Belt, a Cotopaxi freshman, was diagnosed with autism at 1 year old.

With Belt’s entry into high school, the Langs began to think about what his life would be post-high school.

“What would he do? Where would he live. Who would take care of him? How will he support himself? We thought he loves people and he loves to work hard. How do we support Gus when we are not here? And most importantly, how will Gus and other kids like him support themselves when parents are not around?” the Langs asked on their website.

Part of the Langs’ answer to those questions was the Gus Belt Family Foundation.

Objectives and purpose of the foundation are:

• To provide special education students in high school with the opportunity to learn job skills that can be used in the real world to find employment.

• To create a more inclusive and disability-aware environment among the educational environment, the business and professional community and thereby society at large.

• To allow special education students to be considered as capable, employable and productive members of the job market.

The first job skills program to grow out of the Langs’ desire to help prepare special needs students for the future is the Coffee Cart Program.

Curriculum for the program was developed by Julie Lang following guidelines developed by the U.S. Department of Labor and Employment Office of Disability Employment.

Starting in ninth grade, special needs students with individual education plans (IEPs) in Colorado must have an Individualized Career and Academic Plan (ICAP) with goals designed to prepare them for post-high school work environment.

ICAP is a multi-year process that begins in middle and high school and continues into adulthood.

Colorado Department of Education recommends that each school district develop plans to begin ICAP instruction in middle school to prepare students to develop a

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Photos by D.J. DeJong

Justin Robitaille, a Cotopaxi High School junior, slices a sample of bread recently at Little Red Hen Bakery. Robitaille is participating in the Coffee Cart program, which teaches job skills to prepare special needs students for life after high school.

Cotopaxi High School senior Victoria Robitaille, left, and freshman Kelsey Buss measure brown sugar to make filling for pastries recently at Little Red Hen Bakery. Both girls are in the Coffee Cart program, which teaches interpersonal and job skills students will need to get and maintain jobs after high school.

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