

Pinchbeck's makes a comeback: Partnership provides fertile ground for growth

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By Susan Misur, Register Staff

GUILFORD — A few years ago, Jim Lyman knew he had to wake up and smell the roses.

And now he's helping area flower aficionados do the same.

Lyman spurred the recent reopening of Pinchbeck's Rose Farm, and its new vocational program, while searching for job training for his son, who has autism.

The farm was back in business July 9 after closing last year when owner Tom Pinchbeck felt he couldn't compete with overseas operations.

The 80-year-old establishment will soon employ autistic people in a program called Growing Possibilities, thanks to a new partnership with the nonprofit Ability Beyond Disability.

It all started when Lyman, of Madison, began wondering what employment opportunities his son, Eli, now 18, might have when he graduated from high school, and realized it would be a long search.

"Back then, I thought, 'In five years, where's he going to be, what's he going to do?'" Lyman said.

Then he ran into an old friend, who offered to put him in touch with Ability Beyond Disability. The group, which provides services for people with disabilities, offered to help create a new vocational program for people with autism.

Autism is a developmental disorder affecting a person's ability to communicate and interact with others. Because afflicted individuals are affected to varying degrees, they're considered to be on the autism spectrum.

Lyman, a friend of Pinchbeck's, suggested using the rose farm as an agricultural training site when he heard it was closing last year.

"It started with just an idea, and I wasn't sure whether it would really come to fruition," Pinchbeck said. "They (Ability Beyond Disability employees) have shown a lot of interest and enthusiasm for the project."

Since then, Ability Beyond Disability has provided funding for Pinchbeck to reopen, bring back four employees and hire a summer intern with autism. While Pinchbeck donated 50,000 square feet of greenhouse space valued at \$160,000, Ability Beyond Disability must secure \$1.6 million to operate the project for two years until it becomes profitable.

All profits will help pay for daily farm operations, as well as salaries for 15 more employees — people on the autism spectrum being helped by Ability Beyond Disability.



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"There is a huge wave of kids with autism about to graduate," said Joan Volpe, vice president of Connecticut services for the organization. "Families are really searching for where these kids will work after school, and there aren't many training programs."

Growing Possibilities is the first program Ability Beyond Disability has coordinated that provides not only jobs, but job coaching and training.

"We would love for this to be a profitable business and to replicate it in other farming businesses and industries," Volpe added.

At Pinchbeck's, employees will learn about grading rose quality, packaging flowers, pinching back plants and horticulture basics.

Summer intern Matthew Radler, 19, began working at the farm two weeks ago and is the first person Ability Beyond Disability helped get hired there.

Radler, of Bethany, said he is grateful for the chance to work at Pinchbeck's because he likes working outdoors.

"I've had a cactus garden and I like growing things," said Radler, who added that he'll be going to college to study conservation and the environment.

Pinchbeck said Radler has helped with rose care in the greenhouse and cleaning around the farm, as well as packaging and grading flowers.

"Matthew's interested in getting his hands dirty and fixing things. He's the kind of guy we need around here," Pinchbeck said.

For now, only one greenhouse is open and Pinchbeck expects this year to produce one-third of the amount of roses he used to grow. But as Growing Possibilities expands, he hopes to operate at full capacity and get back to churning out 3 million blooms a year, while also hiring more employees on the autism spectrum and people with other disabilities, as well.

"I'm thrilled. I really didn't think I'd be going back into roses, but I'm excited to be able to get back and continue doing what I've been doing for generations," Pinchbeck said.

"The sky's the limit."

Pinchbeck's is at 929 Boston Post Road and is open 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. Thursdays and Fridays and 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. Saturdays.

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