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Program helps the jobless and people with autism

By: Jeffery Kurz, Record-Journal staff

GUILFORD - Cliff Carter lost his job of 16 years last fall when Pinchbeck's Rose Farm, the last rose farm in Connecticut, went out of business. Owner Tom Pinchbeck shut down the family's 80-year-old enterprise because he could no longer compete with operations overseas.

Given the economy, prospects were far from encouraging. But now Carter is back on the farm, which has reopened thanks to a unique vocational program involving people with autism.

"It's nice to be back at work," said Carter, as he sorted Pinchbeck-grown roses on a recent afternoon. "There's not many places since the recession that have reopened."



Rob Beecher / Record-Journal staff

The farm on Boston Post Road features a greenhouse, reputedly the largest anywhere, that Carter says adds up to a quarter-mile hike if you walk around it.

"It's too much to waste," he observed, "too much to lose."

Carter, a New Haven resident, was one of four employees brought back to work. There's also a summer intern, 19-year-old Matthew Radler, the first of many on the autism spectrum who will take on the responsibility of running the farm. In 1990, Carter said, there were about 40 employees.

The renewed effort at the rose farm is the initial project of a new program called Growing Possibilities. The plan is to create a model that will show just how valuable those with developmental disabilities can be in the workforce.

"It's kind of a marriage of people that want to work with an industry that has been facing challenges here," said Thomas Fanning, president and chief executive of Ability Beyond Disability, a Bethel-based non-profit support agency. Ability Beyond Disability is providing the funds to reopen the farm, and plans to raise \$1.6 million to run it over the next two years, employing 15 people on the autism spectrum. The goal is to achieve profitability after two years and sustain it, Fanning said.

With profitability and the ability to replicate the program will come more opportunity for those with autism.

"This is a new direction for us," Fanning said. "But it's one we have great enthusiasm for."

The program was spearheaded by James Lyman, a Madison resident whose 18-year-old son, Eli, attends May Institute, in Randolph, Mass. Lyman was worried about what opportunities would be available for his son once he was through with the program there.

Because it affects people to such varying degrees, those with autism are said to be on the autism spectrum. The intelligence, ability and talents of those with autism are often clouded by a difficulty in communicating and interacting with others. That makes it particularly difficult when they enter adult years.

"The biggest fear of any parent of a special needs kid is, what next?" said Lyman. "So I started looking around to see what was out there, and there wasn't much."

Lyman, an agent for Farm Family insurance, is of the Lyman Orchards family, of Middlefield. At parent support group meetings, he'd hear over and over again the suggestion that agriculture, with its slower pace, farm environment and residential setting, was well suited for those with autism.

"And growing up in agriculture, I could agree with that," he said.

But Lyman also understood "how difficult of a business it is," and realized he needed a vocational program, and help to start it.

On World Autism Awareness Day in April last year, Lyman ran into Julie Hipp at the state capital. The two knew one another from decades ago. Hipp had worked as a waitress in Lyman's golf course restaurant during the summer when she was attending the University of Connecticut.

"She was walking up to me, and said, 'what are you doing here?'" recalled Lyman.

Hipp is board president of the Connecticut Autism Spectrum Resource Center, a Wallingford-based advocacy and support agency that for that past decade has served those with autism, their families and the professionals that help them. She also has a son with a diagnosis on the autism spectrum.

After discussing Lyman's ideas about an agricultural program that day, Hipp helped him develop it further. She also contacted Ability Beyond Disability.

Lyman contacted Pinchbeck, who was a client. The two also belonged to the same fraternity at Cornell University.

"He said, 'if you can pull it off, I'm interested in talking further with you,'" recalled Lyman.

All that did not take long, but then Ability Beyond Disability took about a year to study the proposal and build a business plan.

"We'd asked Ability Beyond Disability to become rose farmers, so they had to get up to speed on this," said Hipp.

Pinchbeck donated plants in 50,000 square feet of greenhouse area, about a third of the total greenhouse space, and a \$160,000 value. He's also manager of the growing operation under the Growing Possibilities arrangement.

Lyman called the set up "a great consortium" that calls on the expertise of the Autism Spectrum Resource Center and Ability Beyond Disability, and Pinchbeck's ability to raise the plants.

"The big thing here is that once we get the model there's the ability to move it to other locations," said Lyman.

"I look at it like cooperative extension," he said. "They figure out how to make it work in the field. That's what I see in this model. What ends up happening is all of the detail that needs to be known about how to help this population."

The Connecticut Autism Spectrum Resource Center is online at www.ct-asrc.org.

Ability Beyond Disability is on the Web at www.abilitybeyonddisability.org.

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