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Roses, And Jobs, For Autism

Program Employs, Trains Adults With Autism

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GUILFORD — Jim Lyman has spent many sleepless nights worrying about the future of his son, Eli. Diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder, the 19-year-old attends a school in Massachusetts that serves the needs of people with autism.

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But when Eli graduates, what then? Will he be able to find employment?

Lyman, whose family owns Lyman Orchards in Middlefield, knows the hurdles the agricultural industry regularly faces, including the challenge of finding skilled workers. So when he learned in 2008 that Pinchbeck Farm in Guilford, owned by the family of a college friend, was closing after 80 years, Lyman reached out.

In 2009, the farm reopened through an initiative called Roses for Autism, which hires and trains adults on the autism spectrum. Lyman believes the Roses for Autism model can be reproduced in other types of businesses to create employment opportunities for people like his son.

"It's exciting to have the pieces come together, and what's more exciting is reaching out to the agricultural community," said Lyman, who sells insurance to farm families.

"The unemployment rate among people with autism is 88 percent," he said. "The whole idea is that if we can employ two or three on every farm in every community, then you begin to put a dent in that 88 percent."

Through Roses for Autism, the farm employs five adults on the autism spectrum and will bring in two more in the coming months. One is Christopher Roos, 23, of Branford, who has a mild variant of autistic spectrum disorder and can find social interaction a challenge.

But on the farm, social interaction occurs regularly — in the greenhouse and production areas, when he works alongside the farm's other employees and in the retail shop, when he answers the phone, waits on customers and interacts with his bosses. Little by little, Roos says, his comfort level is rising.

After a recent morning of pruning, picking and sorting roses, Roos strolled the path between two large greenhouses. Brushing dirt from his hands, he shook hands with a visitor and assured his boss that he was drinking plenty of water in the hot sun. He made eye contact, smiled and easily answered questions about his job.

"I'd say it's helped me in dealing with different people and to follow instructions," said Roos, who plans to return in the fall to his community college computer studies.

Teaching Social Skills

Competition from Latin American farms was the main reason the Pinchbeck Farm closed, after supplying roses to garden centers and retail businesses across the country for eight decades. But more than 32,000 rose bushes are

blooming again because of the Roses for Autism program. It's an initiative of Growing Possibilities, a division of the nonprofit Ability Beyond Disability organization.

"Roses is our first endeavor and it's really cool. We are a transitional program. Our whole concept is for people to come and learn," said Wallingford resident Julie Hipp, manager and director of Growing Possibilities and the mother of an adult child with autism. "We are teaching them social skills, how to deal with change, flexibility without it causing stress."

And, of course, how to grow roses — row upon row of them inside the farm's 50,000-square-foot greenhouse, which on a hot summer day has the atmosphere of a sauna. The roses are sold on site, at corporate events and sponsored flower booths, at farmers markets and distributed for sale at local businesses. The employees with autism participate in all aspects of the business.

"Some work in the greenhouses, others do e-marketing, are drivers, work in the retail and at farmers markets and do the packaging," Hipp said. "That's the key with autism, generalizing what you learn to other environments. The roses are the environment in which they learn how to be in a typical work environment."

Employees come to the farm through referrals from social-service agencies and the encouragement of their families. They participate in a two-week assessment and, if hired, begin to learn about the agricultural field through peer mentoring with the farm's full time employees — all of whom have been trained to work with people who have autism.

"The goal is for them is to work here and then move on to other jobs," said Hipp, who has contacted other Connecticut farm owners to inform them of the program. "We don't want to be thought of as only a shoreline operation, because we are going to branch out to other businesses, too."

Hardworking Employees

Even though they can be hardworking employees, individuals with autism have difficulty finding jobs, said Kathryn Reddington, director of the division of autism services at the state Department of Developmental Services. And yet being employed and finding a job that suits your needs and abilities is important, she said, not just for people with autism, but for everyone.

"There are issues with unemployment and underemployment for people with [autism spectrum disorder]," Reddington said. "Their employment is sometimes not commensurate with their education experiences."

Roses for Autism will hold an open house and battle of the bands event called Autism Rocks at the farm July 24, from 3 to 7 p.m. The farm is at 929 Boston Post Road. For information, go to <http://www.rosesforautism.com> or call 203-453-2186.

"We are doing it to sell roses," Hipp said of the family-friendly event. "But more importantly, we want to get the word out that there is a good pool of talented people that are employable."

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