

Features

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Launching Careers

Ronda Payne

In 1968, when Cape Abilities was formed, it was unlikely that the Cape Cod families involved could have predicted the organization's successful move into farming, greenhouse growing, and food and garden retail, but opportunities of this magnitude are seldom anticipated.

James Barnes, director of social enterprise with Cape Abilities, explains that in 2006, a board member donated a farm in Dennis, Massachusetts, to the organization and new growth options began to unfold for people with disabilities who are served by the organization.

"That first year we employed three individuals with disabilities," he says. "By the end of this year, it will probably be between 50 and 60 individuals who will get a chance to work at the Cape Abilities farm."

An Expanding Footprint

The farm began as a vegetable producer and sold CSA boxes called the Salad Club. The club still continues, but more has been added to the mix. Open seven days a week from March through December, the farm is focused on sustainable practices in growing and selling produce, flowers and planters. It's particularly well-known for tomatoes and sells a number of produce items to local restaurants. There are also a wide range of gardening hardgoods and local Cape Cod products sold at the market at the farm, making for a destination shopping experience. If that weren't enough, in December the farm sells wreaths and Christmas trees along with other seasonal items.

There's also a farm market in Chatham, which is open seasonally and offers customers a complete retail experience with produce from the Dennis-based farm, locally crafted food items and gift items from local artists. This has become a "must-stop" location for locals and tourists.

"People really loved our mission and they were buying vegetables through our CSA and they wanted to buy all kinds of things through us," James says. "We started bringing in locally produced products to augment our produce."

This approach allows the farm to extend the employment season, which ultimately is the core of what the farm is about. Individuals with autism, Down syndrome, brain injuries and other developmental disabilities who are served by the Cape Abilities organization can choose to work at the farm or the farm market if they're seeking meaningful employment opportunities. Some who work at the farm take their work-ready skills to other jobs in the green industry.

"There's an individual who now works for Mahoney's Garden Center," notes James. "He came to the Cape Abilities program really needing a lot more time to have interactions with the public. He's on the autism spectrum. He didn't really communicate with the consumers at all."

Now, after spending time with the supportive staff and volunteers at the farm, he's enjoying his new job. It's because the program strives to develop three things in participants: self-confidence to interact with the public, stamina to work a full day and ability to work in a diverse workplace.

More Ways to Help

Not every organization that wants to help Cape Abilities has the option to hire one of the program's participants. Companies in the green industry can get involved in any of three ways.

"A vendor or another garden center can help Cape Abilities Farm," James said. "You can employ one of the individuals we serve, and we would come in and provide some of the job coaching support to help with that transition in your business. Another way is if you're a vendor and you want to sell us [product, you can] give us better pricing and you can support our program that way. The third way is you could be a sponsor. We could promote you as a sponsor and a business partner of the Cape Abilities Farm and you're supporting people across the industry."

The farm is the largest social enterprise of Cape Abilities and generates annual sales of \$1.2 million with the more than 70 people involved. Of those, more than 60 are individuals with disabilities and earn minimum wage (or better) as they learn skills.

"We're trying to help the industry with work-force development," James notes. "We want to launch people into careers in the community."

The Benefits of a Blended Business

Cape Abilities participants can spend six months or a year working at the farm to gain the experience and confidence needed to move into a job in the green industry. They benefit from the "blended-business" approach of the farm in that the work involves greenhouse and farm tasks, interacting with customers and working in a retail environment.

"The most important thing is that people need to have a safe place where sometimes they're allowed to have a bad day," he says. "Over time, the goal is to have fewer bad days. A bad day for someone with a disability could be very different than [it would be for] you or me. We just need to provide that space where you get to come back the next day and try again."

The staff and volunteers at the farm model the behavior the program wants participants to strive for. There are going to be incidents that can't happen in a standard workplace, so as James explains, the staff and volunteers identify issues and help participants move past them.

"It makes you have to be a better manager," he notes. "It's really what we'd all want. You have to be clear with expectations and make sure we all understand what our jobs are."

James says that the best teams—those that are the most productive and creative—are truly diverse, which means people with disabilities are included. Cape Cod has one of the highest unemployment rates in the country for adults with disabilities who want to work. He wants to see the Cape Abilities programs help to "smash" the stigma of sharing the community with people with disabilities.

"Individuals with disabilities are every bit a part of the community as you or I are a part of the community and they should be afforded opportunities," he says.

The relationships between Cape Abilities Farm and its partner organizations are flexible depending on how an organization wants to be involved. The Mahoney's relationship is a good example of a company that fully appreciates what Cape Abilities is doing.

"The Mahoney's relationship is about three years old," James says. "And they are truly invested in it. If someone is

maybe having a bad day or moving a little bit backward, they contact us and we try to help with the situation. It's a true partnership."

Cape Abilities Farm is looking for new partnerships with vendors who are interested in employing people with disabilities and vendors who provide greenhouse and nursery items, garden hardgoods and more. **GP**

A writer since she could hold a pen, Ronda Payne is passionate about words. In 2007, she kissed "real jobs" goodbye and began her true occupation as a full-time copywriter, freelancer and storyteller. She's a regular contributor to a range of publications with an emphasis on those in agriculture. Ronda joyfully lives in Maple Ridge, B.C., Canada, in yet another renovation project home with her husband and their pets.



- Caroline Kokkins started training as a cashier, but it was working with her hands in the garden center where she really thrived. Photo by Cape Abilities Farm
- Phil Weber is enrolled at a local college while also receiving training at Cape Abilities Farm. He finds working with the flowers very relaxing and really likes following clear instructions. Photo by Cape Abilities Farm
- Matt Clancy, a 30 year old with Aspergers Syndrome, spent three seasons as a participant in the Cape Abilities Farm training program. Verbal communication was very difficult for Matt and his physical fitness made it hard for him to make it through a full workday. Now as a staff member, Matt helps train participants and volunteers in crop production and cashiering. He has become a critically important part of the Cape Abilities Farm staff. Photo by Cape Abilities Farm