

Reinventing Roses for Autism

After resurrecting the last local rose production farm in the Northeast, Roses for Autism is about to reinvent itself to better advance the cause of autism employment.

Here is how the story of Roses for Autism has typically been told in newspaper accounts over the last few years:



Roses for Autism was launched in 2009 as a new model for employing adults on the autism spectrum in agriculture. The historic Pinchbeck Rose Farm in Gilford, Connecticut, was about to close down for several reasons, including competition from roses flown in from South America and difficulty locating dependable workers. Autism parent-advocate Jim Lyman and rose grower Tom Pinchbeck approached local disability services provider Ability Beyond Disability with an idea: Why not hire people on the spectrum to help meet the labor needs of the rose farm?

And Roses for Autism was born, with a goal of employing between 15 and 20 people on the spectrum as they resurrect the last source of locally grown roses in the entire northeastern U.S.



Joan Volpe

That account, says Joan Volpe with Ability Beyond Disability, is **ALMOST** correct.

"The original idea from Jim Lyman was, would we be interested in doing a vocational training program at the Pinchbeck Farm to get folks ready to be employed in different agricultural settings?" From the very beginning, Volpe says, the vision was to run the facility as a combination rose farm and training/assessment facility – not to just hire people with autism.

But the last two years have been enlightening, Volpe adds: "As with all new businesses there are growing pains that we are working through and learning from."

The plan was to have young adults with autism come to the program for a vocational assessment / training program, which would last either 40 hours for clients of local voc rehab agencies, or several months for students from local school systems. This assessment would help identify any support needs the individual might have and familiarize them with the expectations of the

workplace. Then they would move on to employment at Roses for Autism or in local farms and businesses. Although Roses for Autism has conducted a large number of assessments / trainings, so far only one person from the program has been placed in another local farm.

"The demands of the agricultural industry in terms of productivity are intense and therefore it takes longer to get people to competitive standards." Volpe says,



"What we have learned over the last couple of years is that folks on the autism spectrum really needed a much longer time to get ramped up to be competitive."

So far, the vision of seeding local farms with experienced, qualified workers with autism has not yet been realized.

Volpe notes that other farms and businesses in the area have been interested in hiring people on the autism spectrum from the program since it started. "We haven't been able to respond to those needs as fully as we had hoped, but we continue to nurture the relationships. And when people from our program are at industry standards, we will be able to promote those employment connections for both sides – businesses and job seekers."



Although a few graduates of the program have taken short term jobs locally and then moved on to successful semesters in area colleges, most of the permanent placements for people going through the assessment/training have been internal to Roses for Autism, as people applied for open positions and earned them. Today, it is an integrated workplace, with approximately half of the employees on the autism spectrum, working side by side with neurotypical employees, earning the same pay and benefits.

But Lori Gregan believes the placement numbers do not tell the whole story.

Gregan is Retail Operations Manager at Roses for Autism. She says "Many great outcomes here at Roses can't be measured by numbers or assessments, but by moments in the day to day happenings"

Gregan tells of one employee with autism who has changed so drastically that his mother called a few times to ask what had happened. "He smiles now all the time," Gregan says, "And has made a friend with a co-worker. They go to the movies together, and he just got his driver's license, so

he can get himself back and forth to work alone." That young man is enrolled part-time at a community college but continues to work at Roses for Autism.

Another young man who works at the facility is quite shy and soft spoken, and at first worked only in the packing room. "One day he motioned to ask if he could answer the (ringing) phone," Gregan remembers. After he answered the call, "He brought me the message, which he took perfectly, and asked if he could work in the retail area with customers and the register. He now is my Saturday sales associate. He also has a full case load at a community college."

Because people with autism have difficulty reading social cues, they usually avoid customer service situations. Gregan was amazed that this young man felt confident and assertive enough to request the change on his own – and be successful with it.

"I have seen many such moments" she says.

For the Roses for Autism team, these accomplishments count as major outcomes of the vocational training program: "When one (of the employees with autism) steps up to a task that might be uncomfortable or out of their comfort zone," Gregan says, "Or turns and mentors another; or maybe just says good morning or goodbye at the end of day - these small steps, open a door to the next road of life for them."



The Packing Room

However, the management team expects Roses for Autism to be both a vocational training program and a working business.



**Tom
Pinchbeck**

Tom Pinchbeck, now the Managing Director and Head Grower for the business, says that the retail part of the operation has struggled in the last two years and sales are somewhat lower than called for in the business plan. "It has taken us longer than initially thought to get our sales moving, pushing them up" Pinchbeck says, "But we are also working in a pretty tight economy right now. As someone who has been in this business before, it doesn't surprise me, but it was a little more surprising to some of my coworkers who were not in Pinchbeck's Roses before. We're not quite at break even, but we are ahead of our budget. We have been holding our costs back. So the bottom line has been a positive one. We are doing a little better than we expected to be doing."

As for the work force, Pinchbeck says the actual greenhouse tasks have been a slight challenge for some employees with autism. The greenhouses are huge - 50,000 square feet in use, with another 100,000 available for future expansion - and the rows are long.

"You get into one of those rows and it seems like it goes on forever," Pinchbeck says,



"It is hard to work in a team in there because you are each in your own little row. In the packing room you can work more as a team – like, say, we are putting boxes together or we are grading roses into dozens, and there will be three or four of us all working on it together."



Even so, of the six full time employees working in the greenhouse, two are people with autism. Over in the packing room, 12 of the 20 or so staff are people with autism.

And Roses for Autism has big changes planned for the immediate future.

Volpe and the staff of Roses For Autism have restructured their vocational training program to include new training tracks and curricula, to integrate the lessons they have learned over the last two years. Starting in January, 2012, there will be five main stages in the vocational training program:

1. An initial **Job Readiness Interview** - which Volpe describes as a "meet and greet" lasting about two hours.
2. **Vocational Assessment /Training** - 40 hours over 4 weeks. This will help identify support needs and help individuals learn about the social norms and expectations of the workplace.
3. **Employment Readiness Training** – a 12 week program during which individuals will choose to concentrate in one of three vocational tracks:
 - a. Agricultural (greenhouse or packing room)
 - b. Customer Service Retail
 - c. E-Marketing/Social Media Marketing

Employment readiness will include a combination of classroom training on "soft skills" and on time in the work environment.

4. **Transition to Work Training** – a time of less intensive, less structured supports in the work environment, as a transition to natural supports, almost an internship period. It will also include job seeking skills, mock interviews, and help locating local job openings.

5. **Follow-up** – a six month monitoring following placement in a job in the community to ensure that the employment is stable. This is longer than is standard follow-up for most disability employment service providers, but Volpe and Emmett believe it is needed for people with autism in new work settings.

At this point, Volpe says, local school systems and parents pay for most of their vocational services. However, project staff are actively reaching out to the Connecticut Bureau of Rehabilitative Services to build connections with local vocational rehabilitation offices.

At the 2011 Autism Works National Conference, Carrie O'Connell from Ability Beyond Disability was inspired as she listened to corporate consultant James Emmett and parent-advocate Heather Davis speak about their innovative Fruits of Employment project for TIAA-CREF. This project is pioneering ways to integrate young adults with autism into existing work crews on productive commercial farms on the west coast. O'Connell and Volpe soon contacted Emmett for help in implementing their new vision for vocational services in their project.



James Emmett

Emmett, who helped organize the innovative Walgreens autism / disability employment program, was excited about the possibilities:

"I was really impressed with their model."

Emmett has been helping the Roses for Autism team develop their new curriculum. He is confident the new structure will succeed and be adopted by other groups. "When you go to Roses at the Pinchbeck Rose Farm," Emmett says, "They clearly have a huge facility, but I can't see why this thing can't be a portable thing for agencies and organizations that have smaller greenhouses. I think they still will be able to tap this model."

On the business side, changes are underway as well.

A marketing company is revamping the online sales website for Roses for Autism and advising on advertising. New construction is planned to expand the on-site retail space. And project staff are building connections to regional corporations with an eye to becoming a preferred provider of flowers for occasions such as Secretary's Day and staff birthdays.

These strategies will augment their ongoing sales at local farmers markets and community events.

In April, 2011, the Connecticut General Assembly named Roses for Autism the Business of the Year for the state.





But their biggest marketing tool, says Volpe, is the experience of locally grown roses:

"The fragrance of the roses is spectacular. They open up phenomenally."

"When you purchase a rose shipped from overseas, the rose has a large head and it doesn't really open any more. When you buy it that is the extent of its openness. When you buy our rose, it is a world of difference. The rose will continue to open up. You will have the full face of the rose, and you will have it for longer than you will have our competitor's rose. And the fragrance is almost like perfume in the home. It is really an experience."

You can experience the difference yourself by purchasing roses online at <http://www.rosesforautism.com>. Or you can come to the Autism Works National Conference in St. Louis, where the roses will be on display.

Tom Pinchbeck will participate in the Panel of Employers session at the Autism Works National Conference in St. Louis, MO, March 6 & 7, 2012.

James Emmett will present at the conference on "What VR & DD Need to Know About Autism" and on "Business Diversity Initiatives and Autism". He will also participate in an open job counseling session for young adults with autism at the conference. Details on the conference are available at

<http://www.facebook.com/pages/Autism-Works/136057253090452>

or at <http://dps.missouri.edu/Autism.html>.

The Autism Works national conference is presented by:



Disability Policy and Studies
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