

Ability Beyond

Bethel, CT

Roses for Autism

Project Objectives

Roses for Autism is a unique venture, combining training and employment of people on the autism spectrum with the growth and sale of flowers. This is a business that not only employs people; it employs people who have an unacceptably high level of unemployment. The successes being demonstrated are the foundation for replicating the model's best practices in other agricultural settings as well as other industries.

Roses for Autism is unique, integrating three businesses in a single enterprise:

- Employment and training for people with Autism Spectrum Disorders
- Agricultural - Raising flowers in the country's largest free-standing glass greenhouse
- Sales - Rooted in autism cause-based marketing

The project objectives of the employment training model included:

- 1) Students with autism, 16 or older and in their transition years, learn basic job skills necessary for employment in a real-life setting.
- 2) Adults with autism learn job and interpersonal, relationship-building skills through hands-on vocational training that is customized to support each participant's abilities, current skills, goals and needs.
- 3) Adults with autism obtain job skills assessments and employment opportunities.
- 4) A workforce made up of individuals with autism is developed for agricultural and other industries.
- 5) Roses for Autism program becomes an example of an employer that trains and employs adults with disabilities which can be replicated.

The goals of the agricultural and sales components included:

1. Growing, pruning and grading sixteen varieties of roses and three varieties of lilies at Pinchbeck Farm in Guilford, CT, the location of Roses for Autism.
2. Selling 300,000 blooms and reinvesting the proceeds from rose sales back into Roses for Autism in order to evaluate and train more participants.

Project Steps

Employment Training ~

The Career Training Model provides individuals on the autism spectrum the chance to learn the skills necessary to maintain meaningful employment, and occurs over the course of 16 months (this scheduled allows for scheduling conflicts, holidays, and schools breaks). It begins with a comprehensive assessment, exposes individuals to skill building opportunities and real work experiences and commences with employment and follow-along supports

To meet the person where they are on their path to employment, the program has six essential elements of success:

1. Job Readiness Evaluation/Initial Screening
2. Vocational Exploration & Work Exposure
3. Employment Readiness Training (Classroom and On the Job Training)
4. Transitional Work Training
5. Employment (Job Search & Placement)
6. Following Along Support

1. Job Readiness Evaluation/Initial Screening at Pinchbeck Rose Farm in Guildford, CT:

The Career Training Program is comprehensive and begins with a Job Readiness Evaluation/Initial Screening to evaluate a person's interest, past experiences and abilities. The individual meets with the Career Development Coordinator to identify what jobs they would like to participate in and be assessed on. This is an opportunity to have individuals tour the farm, meet program staff and observe the environment. During this time an individual's career interests, strengths, weaknesses and past job experiences are reviewed and this gives the individual an opportunity to see if they would like to participate in the program.

2. Vocational Exploration & Work Exposure:

The Vocational Exploration & Work Exposure is a time limited process (up to 60 hours over the course of four weeks) of determining a person's skills, interests and capabilities toward developing the skills necessary for employment. The Vocational Exploration & Assessment Evaluations provides an opportunity for an individual to gather information and gain exposure to a variety of work settings to observe and try out tasks under supervision. It enables individuals to build an information base to make choices about work options.

Upon completion of the assessment, a report is written by the Employment Specialist and reviewed with the individual. This is a comprehensive working evaluation that can be used for future employment opportunities, school records and incorporated into a career portfolio. Individuals who meet the minimum qualifications of the position they wish to obtain (i.e., retail) will move on to the Employment Readiness Training phase of the program. An individual can chose to participate in one of the three Career Tracks: Agriculture, Retail/Customer Service or E-Marketing/Information Technology.

3. Employment Readiness Training

The Employment Readiness Training provides an opportunity for an individual to participate in a specialized training, to help build the necessary technical (job related) and soft skills (work habits, co-working) to obtain successful employment. The training is over 12 weeks (15hrs/week for four weeks & 20hrs/wk for eight weeks), and there is a 2:1 ratio of participant to Employment Skills Instructor.

Training takes place in a class room setting at the farm site allowing participants to talk about their experiences, learn from peers, develop social skills and work through challenging work situations with a support team. Within each of the career tracks there are multiple jobs, where the skills learned are transferrable to other businesses. Individuals rotate through a series of activities and on job positions in a 12 week cycle.

The Agriculture Career Track includes Floral Designer, Pack Room Worker, Grader of Roses by quality positions, Greenhouse Maintenance, Green House Worker, Snow Removal, Lawn Maintenance and Rose Cutter. The Customer Service/Retail Career Track includes Delivery Driver, Retail Sales Clerk (cash register, package roses, and communication with customers), Phone Orders, Order Fulfillment, Janitorial/Porter Responsibilities and Basic Stock positions. The E-Marketing/IT Career Track includes E-Marketing Project positions, Social Network Coordinator, Public Relations, Marketing Research & Analysis, Facebook and Website Design/Maintenance, Cash Register Touch Screen Maintenance and Online Orders.

4. Transitional Work Training

The Transitional Work Training provides an opportunity for individuals to gain additional experience on the job in a job of their choice, to determine if they are ready for a career in this field. A mock interview is conducted as it would in a typical work environment. The transitional work training is over eight weeks, and is 20 hours per week. Individuals are evaluated at regular intervals for their readiness for hire or placement.

5. Job Search & Placement

Individuals work with an Employment Specialist to obtain employment in the community or on the farm. We anticipate that it will take on average three hours a week for three months for an individual to obtain a job. During this time they will be modifying their resume, working on mock interviews and going out to job sites to complete applications and submit resumes.

6. Follow Along Support

Once an individual is employed an Employment Specialist provides follow along support to monitor successful employment, and to identify if they have any additional support needs. The program provides six months of follow along support. In the first three months support is provided two hours a week and is reduced to one hour per week during the last three months.

Transportation to and from the rose farm is provided for those individuals who need it, and for participants who live within a 30 mile radius. The cost of transportation is negotiated on an individual basis and is based on each person's specific needs and location.

Project Outcomes

Employment Training ~

The effectiveness of Roses for Autism is measured in the number of people that are assessed; trained; and that ultimately gain competitive, integrated employment. Over the course of the grant period we have learned how to best assess readiness for employment training, what worked well and what needs a different approach.

In order to build the foundation for greater successes in competitive employment, changes to the vocational training portion of the program began in January 2012. One such change is that the program will target six essential elements of success within the three career tracks. Another addition is the incorporation of advisory groups such as Program Development & Curriculum – comprised of specialists in the Autism community, parents and school partners; Business – to help grow rose’s sales; and Agriculture to expand the variety of flowers/items grown and sold. Starting February 2012, free parent support groups and social skills groups for people living with ASD’s will be marketed to schools and the community at large.

Agricultural ~

In order to increase opportunities for pre-vocational and employment training, Roses for Autism is expanding its floral production to produce more blooms. Diversification of floral production is planned to increase our product mix and the variety of the arrangements. In addition to selling 16 varieties of roses and Oriental lilies, the project is adding Gerbera daisies to its offerings. Energy enhancements at the farm will produce operational savings so that more money can be reinvested toward employment training. Roses for Autism is keeping the last rose farm in New England alive in Guilford, CT and available to the local community. Communities in Connecticut are benefiting from Roses for Autism through the creation of new jobs and an expansion of their tax bases as trained workers are developed that meet agriculture and others employers’ needs. Roses for Autism sold 290,500 roses in calendar year 2011.

Sales ~

The incidence of autism and the desire to purchase locally grown products create a large cause-based market for flowers grown by Roses for Autism. We have identified several sales channels which will be developed more fully in the coming years. Channels include retail sales on-site at Pinchbeck’s Farm, building on the previous 70 year history of the farm; to corporations for employee recognition programs and cause-based sales events; through online sales orders through our website (1 of 4-5 families have a member on the spectrum); through wholesale orders to supermarket retailers to reach in-store cause-based consumers.

Roses for Autism is benefitting from professional marketing volunteers from Amplitude Marketing Group, Inc. The Group has created and began implementation of the “Blooming with Benefits” equity based; emotionally relevant digital cause-based marketing plan focused on driving floriculture sales to \$767,000. In this plan the vessel is roses and other floriculture to sell support for the cause of Autism. The plan was designed to meet the needs of the Roses for Autism venture for a number of years and be repeatable over multi-year applications.

Successes:

Incidental reports from families, schools and program staff noted that some participants are reporting and/or exhibiting increased confidence, better grades in school and motivation to be more social. In some instances, participants are forming friendships with peers, staff and/or customers. One unexpected and extremely exciting success was that the more seasoned participants provided mentoring for new program participants. Another more personal success is the young man who after being driven back and forth to the program by his mother, learned to navigate public transportation to get to work independently. Desiring still more independence, he recently secured his driver’s license – a goal that was



beyond his wildest expectations. He is now working toward saving his money from his job to buy a car. Overall, participation in the program is having a positive impact on the quality of people's lives.

Roses for Autism was recognized as the 2011 Business of the Year by the Connecticut General Legislature and Autism advocates.

Roses for Autism received the Connecticut Rookie of the Year 2011 award from the Connecticut Florist's Association.

The biggest outcome and indicator of success is the program's impact on the lives of individuals with autism. Following is Dan's story.

Dan is a senior at Cheshire High School who participated in a work assessment during the spring of 2011. Dan reported having limited work experience and had difficulty following directions from employers/supervisors.

During the assessment, Dan thrived in situations where he was able to work as part of a team and interact with other workers. Having clear and concise step-by-step directions to learn new tasks as well as knowing ahead of time his job responsibilities for the day improved his self-confidence and job performance. Dan, along with his team, developed daily checklists of tasks to use as a reference/assistance in independently moving from one task to another. A resume was created and mock interviews were practiced.

Dan's success is in securing a packaging room position at Rogers Orchards as well as a customer service position at Farmer Joe's, a farm stand. Dan is currently working 18 hours a week and is taking classes at Gateway Community College. Dan is an example of someone who is successfully employed in the agriculture industry due to Roses for Autism.

