

Person with Autism Starts Business

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I hear dogs love them.

David Shunkey of Albuquerque, New Mexico, makes Peanut Butter Puppy Bites, which are crisp canine treats shaped to resemble dog bones. Like any upstart business owner would, Shunkey has been getting his small business off the ground, looking for markets, and refining his recipe. The only difference is this businessman has autism.

A National Institutes of Health website defines autism as causing "severe and pervasive impairment in thinking, feeling, language, and the ability to relate to others." Its severity ranges over a wide spectrum.

"David is nonverbal," said Heather Gooch, who is program manager of supportive employment with Community Options in Albuquerque. She spoke for Shunkey with his permission. "He knows sign language and can understand more than he can sign. We also read his facial expressions and body language, and he uses different sounds to communicate. He has a speech language pathologist on his team and they have developed a communication dictionary to document his sound and hand movements. So if there is someone new working with him, they know how to communicate with him."

Community Options has an on-site job coach helping Shunkey with marketing, baking, and selling. His dog treats are all natural, and include whole wheat flour, unbleached white flour, corn meal, rolled oats, eggs, safflower oil, vanilla, and peanut butter.

"Currently, David bakes four to five dozen once or twice a week out of his kitchen at home," said Gooch. "We're looking to get a commercial kitchen for him. So far, five businesses have taken on his biscuits." He has the potential to bake up to 75 dozen per week. He sells them for five dollars a dozen to dog groomers, vets, and pet shops.

In his 50s, Shunkey grew up in an institution that had one staff member for every 30 clients, which unfortunately led to his developing some behavioral issues. Now he lives in a group home. Community Options has support staff for Shunkey and a therapist doing site analysis to make sure the kitchen stays safe.

Gooch said, "David really gets involved in the baking process." With help, he has been pursuing FDA approval to market his baked goods to humans. Of course, if receiving this approval, his new food item likely wouldn't resemble dog treats and would have a different name. Gooch said FDA approval could come within three months.

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