

## Opening Doors



**Community Options provides a higher quality of life to people with disabilities.**

*By Ilene Dube*

*Photographs courtesy of Community Options, Inc.*

Katie shows a visitor around Community Option's Daily Plan It facilities on Alexander Road in West Windsor. In the first room, a group of people is watching a video on professionalism. "They're learning to be respectful of each other's space and how to dress for work," says Katie, 34. In addition to learning business etiquette, members of the job club will write short stories to help identify their personal goals. One is an artist who likes drawing cartoons, another wants to write a cookbook.

"We help them to do that," says Katie.

What this group of job seekers – including Katie – have in common is, they all have developmental disabilities. But as Katie demonstrates, they can also be articulate and have astute memory skills. With their drive, and the resources of Community Options, these people are primed to work.



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Some work at the Daily Plan It, answering phones, cleaning conference rooms and bathrooms. They help with printing, sorting, stuffing, stamping, hole punching and binding. “We get it done on a deadline,” says Katie. “It keeps us busy.”

When Katie, who has been with Community Options since 2006, isn't working at the Daily Plan It, she works at Home Goods assembling lamps, folding towels and organizing items on shelves in the food aisles. Once she's arranged all the bottles and jars and packaged goods, customers “don't have to ask an associate where it is, they can find it,” boasts a prideful Katie. “Andrew helped me get the job.”

Andrew Park, the managing director at Community Options, says “She's a good worker. She tries hard and is respected.”

Katie, who lives with her parents in West Windsor, uses TRADE to get to work. TRADE is a free ride service for eligible Mercer County residents to maintain their health, improve their financial status, or make use of medical, therapeutic and recreational services, or to gain access to other needed community resources. “It's very tricky. If the bus is late, I'm late, and my pay will be deducted,” she says.

Community Options owns the building the Daily Plan It operates. Tenants rent the space and pay minimum wage to the Community Options clients who work for them. “Our operation is self-sustaining and doesn't cost taxpayers a thing,” says President and CEO Robert Stack, who founded Community Options in 1989.

The Daily Plan It markets itself as a place where “business is the center of your universe.” When tenants discover there are people with disabilities working there, and interact with them in a way that's not forced, “they will reduce their prejudice or anxiety,” says Stack. “We are trying to create ways people with disabilities can be part of the fabric of the community and not stand out.”

Among the tenants are a real estate office, attorneys and iSpace. There's an office for a job coach and a nutritionist, and a conference room with a large mahogany table and a monitor “if Robert Stack wants to give a presentation,” says Katie. There are devices “to compensate for people who can't speak or communicate,” she adds.

“Katie is an excellent communicator,” says Stack, later, behind the door in the conference room. “She is an anomaly. We develop compensatory strategies to enable people with disabilities to get jobs, either with an employment specialist (a job coach) or built-in supports – help from co-workers.” A co-worker may help, for example, blind people or people in wheelchairs to roll napkins, a job servers or hostesses may not have time to do.

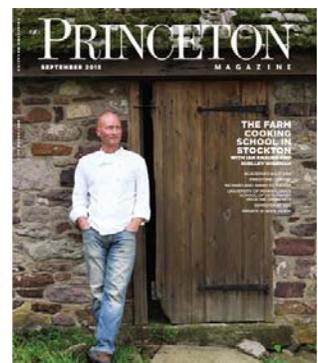


HOLIDAY 2015

## URBAN AGENDA:



HOLIDAY 2015



SEPTEMBER 2015



In addition to the Daily Plan It, Community Options runs Vaseful, a flower shop in Edison. The organization enables workers to earn money doing what they want to do, and achieve a higher quality of life. A person with disabilities can grow by interacting with people in the workplace. By creating natural ways in which people with disabilities can interface with those without disabilities, "They will blossom helping others and being among those who are kind to them."

Stack grew up in Pennsylvania. As a 13-year-old in seminary school, required to take classes six days a week, he volunteered "in a big home for children with disabilities," he recounts. Years later, after leaving the priesthood, he went back and learned it had been closed and the people were put in institutions.

"We need to do a better job of keeping people out of institutions," he says. "New Jersey has the second largest number of people with developmental disabilities in institutions, Texas is the first." The cost at such facilities can be \$200,000 per person a year, he says. North Princeton Developmental Center closed because it was no longer a viable model. "It shouldn't be an option. People with developmental disabilities benefit more in small houses."

Developmental disabilities include cerebral palsy, autism, spinal cord injury, intellectual disability, epilepsy and traumatic brain injury. In the 1999 Olmstead decision, the U.S. Supreme Court affirmed the right of individuals with disabilities to live in the community. The high court upheld the integration mandate of the Americans with Disabilities Act, requiring public agencies to provide services "in the most integrated setting appropriate to the needs of qualified individuals with disabilities." In 2009, the Civil Rights Division launched an aggressive effort to enforce the Supreme Court's decision.

Stack started Community Options to serve the needs of the more than half a million people in the country, and 6,000 in New Jersey, on waiting lists for services. It began out of his home in Bordentown in 1989, with Stack answering the phone in one voice, then changing voices when handing the call off to himself. He began buying properties for homes, and the building for Daily Plan It was purchased in 1996. A building on Farber Road, where Stack's office is, was purchased, and the former Town Topics building on Witherspoon Street was acquired this year for STEP (Schools-To-Employment Program). STEP provides on-the-job training for students with disabilities. Through STEP students work at unpaid internships until hired for the job they are best suited for. For example, a West Windsor-Plainsboro High School graduate with autism tried several positions at Robert Wood Johnson Hospital until discovering that patient transport was what he enjoyed doing most.



MAY/JUNE 2015



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MARCH 2015

In addition to employment, Community Options works to help its clients be as independent as possible, from getting dressed to cooking and getting to work.

Community Options has 100 houses in New Jersey, 100 in Pennsylvania, and operates 35 offices in nine states with a staff of 3,600. Stack estimates 8 to 10 percent growth a year, with the greatest need in New Jersey.

The organization may purchase a house for \$300,000, seek a mortgage to cover 80 percent, and solicit donations, often from families, for the remaining \$60,000. Staff, insurance and mortgage payments are covered by Medicaid.

But a four-person house is not suitable for everyone, Stack points out. Some clients may live with their family and still use Community Options services, like Katie. Others may be better off in Community Options apartments. “We encourage families to think about what they want long term.”

The biggest challenge, says Stack, is ignorance. “We work to educate the community. One of the things I’m most proud of is how we maintain the properties, mowing the lawns – we don’t want to stand out.” To that end, the organization’s 450 vans have no logos so occupants won’t be pointed at.

Another challenge in educating the public is terminology. Stack doesn’t like using the word “special” for people. “A ‘special’ is when something is on sale,” he says. “We serve people, not burgers.”

He points out that autism wasn’t recognized as a disability until 1983, and in 1985 the name of the state organization was changed from the Division of Mental Retardation to the Division of Developmental Disabilities.

Another great challenge is getting people to their jobs. Stack is exploring an Uber-like model that will employ under-utilized vans and connect people with disabilities to transportation by use of an app. “Transportation is the key to inclusion,” he says.



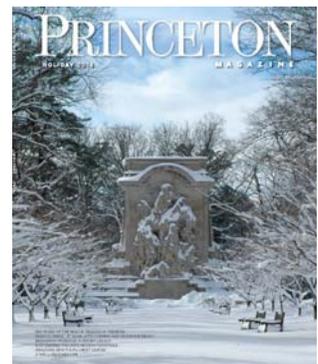
Stack writes to governors inviting them to visit Community Options houses, and when he learned that South Carolina Governor Nikki Haley had taken him up on the invitation, he drove to Columbia to meet her.



FEBRUARY 2015



FAMILY EDITION 2015



HOLIDAY 2014



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“What did the neighbors think when you bought the house?” she asked.

The neighbors were pleased that the house, which had been in foreclosure, was purchased. “We have barbecues quarterly and invite the neighbors, and they love it,” Stack assured Governor Haley. One of the clients gave the governor a tour, but instead of starting with the kitchen or living room went right out to the garage and pointed to a Ford van. “This takes us places,” said the client.

“That’s what we do at Community Options,” says Stack. “We take people places to be a part of their community and give families hope that there are ways and options.”

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