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Mt. Olive gift shop allows disabled to show abilities

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MOUNT OLIVE -- Finding a job can be difficult for anyone, but for Meghan Price, it seemed an impossible feat.

The Succasunna resident has Down syndrome, and despite her business ethic, willingness to learn and past work experience, she found herself with few options, said the 22-year-old's mother, Debbie.

Then she found Presents of Mind, a gift store that provides employment and job training to people with disabilities.

"Before she graduated, her whole life was her school, her peers, her teachers," Debbie Price said. "I was concerned how she would go from being busy all day to nothing. Presents of Mind is perfect. It gives her the opportunity to get up, have a purpose and earn a paycheck, and she just loves it there."

Presents of Mind, which is located at the Mall at Route 206 in Mount Olive, is part of Community Options, a New Jersey organization providing housing, support services and advocacy to empower people with disabilities.

The store is the latest business to join the six entrepreneurial nonprofit businesses that Community Options operates across the state, where individuals with disabilities learn job skills, gain experience and earn a living wage. The organizations run a flower and gift store, Vaseful, in New Brunswick and three Daily Plan It shops, which are complete office, copy and print centers in Morristown, Moorestown and Princeton where people with disabilities work as receptionists, concierges and members of the maintenance staff.

Community Options provides job coaching to people with disabilities and views the real jobs they provide as a launching pad to future work, according to Chris Dixon, Community Options' assistant executive director.

"The toughest challenge for people with disabilities often is getting an interview," Dixon said. "There are a lot of misconceptions about people with disabilities, and many employers think that they cannot do work. We're giving people the ability to prove they can."

Presents of Mind sells high-end gifts, teas from India and China, funky glassware, iron wall hangings, pet products and items for children. It has 10 employees, six of whom have developmental disabilities ranging from Down syndrome to traumatic brain injuries. They are responsible for a wide variety of tasks, including preparing tea for customers, stocking shelves, entering inventory in the computer system and keeping the store tidy.

Many have very little prior job experience.

Dan Reddington, 23, of Rockaway, worked at Kohl's before coming to Presents of Mind about three months ago. The work at Presents of Mind is better, he said, because it's more varied.

"I unpack boxes, clean, and I like working with customers," Reddington said.

Meghan Price has worked several jobs through a program at Roxbury High School, where she graduated this spring. She was a dining room attendant at Wendy's, a silverware wrapper at Longhorn, and she cleaned at a car dealership -- but she has had to work for free at the job she really wants.

"I really like to clean, to make sure everything's just right," Price said, using a feather duster between a rack of wine glasses at Presents of Mind. "But what I really want to do is benefit kids."

Debbie Price said Meghan is volunteering a few days a week at a day-care center that is run by a mother of a child with Down syndrome. She's grateful, though, that Meghan has found a job she enjoys, where she has met some new friends.

Denia Roy, who has a retail background and is the store's employee specialist, had never worked with people with disabilities before coming to Presents of Mind.

"I really didn't know what to expect when I took the job," said Roy, who lives in Wharton.

"Everything has gone so smoothly. I find that I have a more difficult time about keeping track of what needs to get done next more than anything else. For me, it feels rewarding."

About half the 4,000-square-foot store is for employees only, designed to be an open and less stressful environment. There is a storage area, a small kitchen and a large break room that doubles as a conference room where job coaches from Community Options have one-on-one sessions with employees to help them figure out their next step.

"We take a more person-centered approach than many other employers," said Thomas Neville, the organization's director of marketing and community outreach. "We embrace individuals' strengths and give them the time to work out what their interest and goals are, ensuring that a person finds a job that suits them, rather than just filling a vacancy."

According to its Web site, Community Options has helped more than 2,700 people in eight states with disabilities to become active members in their communities since its founding in 1989.

Though some of Community Options' programs receive state and federal funding, Presents of Mind does not, Dixon said. That's part of the reason the store targets the high-end market.

"At the end of the day, this has to be a viable business that makes a profit," Dixon said. "But Presents of Mind is different because when people shop here, they are also doing something good for a population of people who are often forgotten."
