

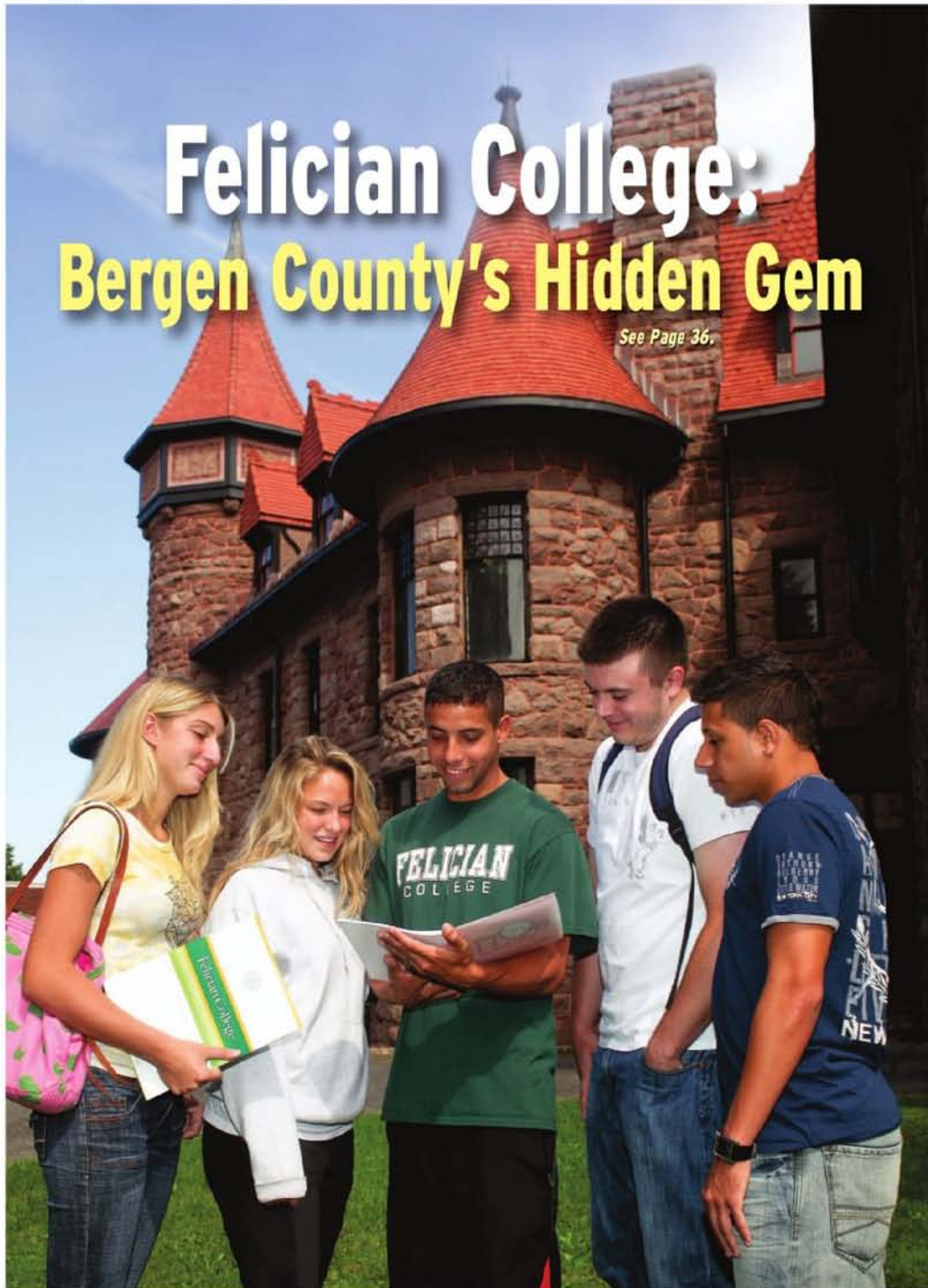
# COMMERCE

THE BUSINESS OF NEW JERSEY

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## Business with a Social Purpose: A Conversation with COI President and CEO Robert Stack

BY JOHN JOSEPH PARKER  
CONTRIBUTING EDITOR

**T**HURSDAY, FEB. 9, 1989 COULD HAVE BEEN JUST another day, but for hundreds of people with developmental disabilities it was a turning point in their lives. They were given the opportunity to choose an organization that was going to rescue them from segregated institutions and place them in inclusive community homes. This was the day that officially marked the opening and incorporation of Community Options, Inc. (COI).

COI began around the kitchen table of Founder and current President and CEO, Robert Stack in Bordentown, New Jersey. With one wall phone, a couple of chairs, pieces of paper and a plethora of dedication, drive and motivation, Stack and his associates opened what we know today as COI—the nation's fastest growing nonprofit organization providing quality support to people with developmental disabilities in 32 offices across 9 states.

For 20 years, COI has developed housing and employment opportunities for people with developmental disabilities. In addition to being instrumental in closing state developmental centers throughout the country and developing the most innovative housing opportunities for people with the most severe developmental disabilities, Stack has worked to develop entrepreneurial businesses that positively employ people with developmental disabilities.

To learn more about COI, *COMMERCE* recently sat down with President and CEO Robert Stack.

**COMMERCE:** *What is the size and scope of COI?*

**ROBERT STACK:** Development started in Mercer County, New Jersey, and quickly grew to 18 out of 21 counties in the state. What started as a couple of group homes has grown into 70 current homes throughout New Jersey serving over 200 people with developmental disabilities. COI has endeavored to develop unique housing opportunities throughout the country including New

York, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, South Carolina, Texas, New Mexico, Kentucky and Connecticut. Across the country, it operates 316 group homes and supervised apartments, and has a \$62.2 million budget.

Community Options had the honor of having the late Eunice Kennedy Shriver on their Board of Directors in Washington, D.C. "Eunice was such an inspiration to all of us through her everlasting commitment to supporting people with disabilities," says COI President and CEO Robert Stack.

**Q.** *In addition to housing, COI also helps people with developmental disabilities find meaningful employment, correct?*

**A.** Community Options Enterprises (COE) has 21 employment programs across New Jersey where we have been successfully placing people with developmental disabilities in real jobs at minimum wage or better. COE is increasing the numbers of people with developmental disabilities that land better jobs with better benefits in a competitive marketplace.

**Q.** *COE operates the only nonprofit flower shop in the entire country. What was your idea behind Vaseful, which runs just like any other floral store?*

**A.** The idea behind Vaseful was to get people with disabilities out of adult training centers where they are warehoused to do piece work all day. Vaseful, just like all of our other entrepreneurial businesses like the Daily Plan It or Just Add Water, is an alternative to the adult training site. They offer real-life work experience for real pay. We are not fans of terminal employment, so the people we are supporting have the opportunity to receive vocational skills training for a period of time and then take that portable skill set and move on to more competitive employment. The evolution of Vaseful and our other businesses is that they are models that are suitable for replication in any place at any time.





Community Options, Inc. President and CEO Robert Stack rang the opening bell at the New York Stock Exchange as a kickoff to COI's 20th Anniversary.



Vaseful and Just Add Water are COI entrepreneurial businesses that offer people with developmental disabilities real-life work experience for real pay.



**Q.** *What is your methodology for retaining your employees?*

**A.** We believe in our employees, their abilities and their futures. Our workforce is currently made up of 1,700 female and 811 male employees across the country. We offer significant training at no cost to all of our employees so they may have an arsenal of resources to utilize when on the job. We have also recently partnered with Kean University, a partnership that allows our employees to attend Kean University to attain a Master's Degree in Social Justice at a nominal cost to them. Also, recognizing employees for a job well done on a monthly, quarterly and annual basis is critical for staff morale and longevity. We have employees that have been with us since the organization's inception in 1989.

**Q.** *What COI endeavor are you most proud of?*

**A.** Having the ability to help a family move their family member from a horrible state-run institution and into their own home in the community. We help one person at a time because the organization believes in individualized attention and service.

**Q.** *Can you provide an example of someone COI helped to make that transition?*

**A.** One of the very first people that I moved out of an institution was Bernard, who lived at the North Princeton Developmental Center for most of his life. He was a person that was told by people working at the institution that he could never live in the community and that he would never be successful. When I had the opportunity to meet Bernard, I knew I had to get him out of that place and that he would succeed. In the early '90s, I was able to move Bernard from that institution into his own home. Today, Bernard is a homeowner and works as a receptionist at a state government building in Hamilton, New Jersey. Bernard has meaningful relationships with friends and is actively involved in his community.

**Q.** *Are people with developmental disabilities represented on COI's Board of Directors?*

**A.** Our Board is made up of people with disabilities: a senior executive with Hershey, Tim Dunigan; the Chef and Owner of Griffin's Restaurant in Creskill, New Jersey, Peter Dulligan; Tim Carden, a previous commissioner of New Jersey's Department of Human Services and currently a founding partner of The Public Private Strategy Group; Delia Donahue of the law firm Pepper Hamilton, LLP; and Dr. Clarence York, the president of Clarence N. York Associates, an international firm that assists agencies to support children and adults with disabilities.

**Q.** *Where do you see COI heading in the next five years?*

**A.** In the future, we will be supporting thousands more people with disabilities all across the country that need our help to find a home and a job. I could easily see our workforce double. We would hope to increase our rate of partnerships with the private sector such as pharmaceutical companies and other corporate entities to work together on important projects. Most importantly, we will continue to help people with disabilities, one person at a time.

**Q.** *With such an important mission, COI can't do it alone, right?*

**A.** I have had the honor of forming relationships with people like Governor Richardson, Governor Perry, Mayor Bloomberg, Mayor Ravenstahl of Pittsburgh and Caren Franzini, the executive director of the New Jersey Economic Development Authority who have all helped to shape Community Options into what it is today.

I am very hopeful about New Jersey's new Governor-elect Chris Christie and Lt. Governor-elect Kim Guadagno and know that this administration will find their moral compass and do the right thing—to expedite the consolidation and subsequent closing of the seven developmental centers in New Jersey that remain open today and warehouse over 3,000 people with disabilities. ■

*Community Options will be hosting its 5th Annual Advocacy Conference in 2010 at The W in Dallas, Texas with Judy Woodruff delivering the opening keynote address. To find out more about COI, please visit [www.comop.org](http://www.comop.org) or call (609) 951-9900.*