

# Giving the Developmentally Disabled a Hand

Community Options' innovative model provides training, work experience

**W**hen attorney Cedric Ashley moved his law office to Princeton last spring, it wasn't the fashionable zip code that attracted him, but his new landlord: Community Options, a nonprofit that operates the office building in order to provide training and jobs for people with developmental disabilities.

By Beth Fitzgerald

"They are doing what more nonprofits need to do — use a revenue-producing, for-profit business to fund and underwrite the costs of the nonprofit," Ashley said.

Ashley rents a private, 100-square-foot office, and shares the building's conference room, reception area and break room with other tenants, mostly other professionals. The rent is below the going rate for Princeton, but Ashley said it was the Community Options approach that brought him to the wooded office park on Alexander Avenue off Route 1.

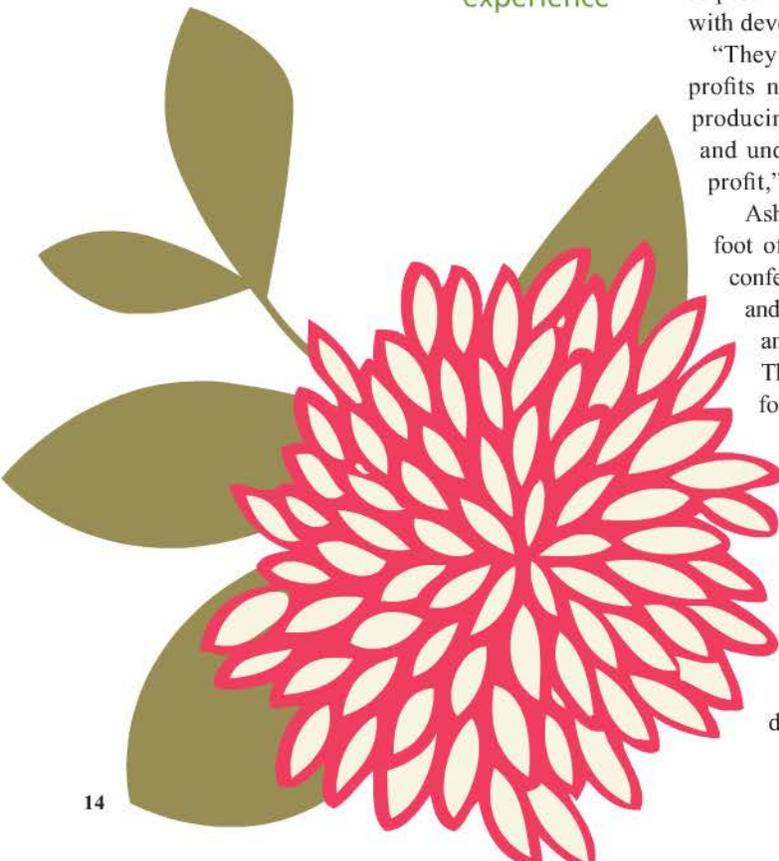
Community Options is a 20-year-old nonprofit that trains and finds jobs for people with developmental disabilities, including mentally

retarded citizens, and survivors of traumatic brain injuries. To carry out this mission, Community Options also operates several for-profit businesses where the disabled clients can get training and work at jobs paying no less than minimum wage.

One of the Community Options for-profit businesses is the Princeton office suite where Ashley rents his office. The disabled clients of Community Options clean and maintain the building, and work at various clerical jobs in the mail room — including a fax and copy center where Ashley can purchase document copying and binding services. The program enables the disabled "to develop skills and work at a real job," Ashley said.

Community Options' commercial office building business, called The Daily Plan-It, also includes buildings in Moorestown and Morristown. The other businesses are a floral shop in New Brunswick, Vaseful Flowers and Gifts, which sends flowers anywhere by phone, and a gift shop/mail order Web site in Flanders, Presents of Mind.

"In New Jersey, we have hundreds of people with severe disabilities who are unemployed or underemployed, and



we have to come up with creative ways to find them jobs — and this is one of them,” said Robert Stack, founder and president of Community Options. The disabled live in communities, often with their families, and working at a Community Options business is a way to “expose people with disabilities to people without disabilities who have no reason to meet them other than through happenstance kinds of situations,” Stack said.

At the Vaseful flower shop, Mary Santasine, of Highland Park, is a disabled individual who is learning how to arrange flowers. She enjoys working at Vaseful: “I like the people. We have

Stack said several nonprofits in New Jersey provide training and paid work, such as in a sheltered workshop setting, for the developmentally disabled — and the need far exceeds the supply of jobs. He said Community Options employs 450 developmentally disabled people at its five for-profit business locations statewide.

“The truth of the matter is that right now in New Jersey, there are well over 6,000 people who are on waiting lists for services like ours,” Stack said. The goal of Community Options is to train the disabled, have them work for a few months or longer to develop their

“It’s been my opinion, and I’ve seen it firsthand, that usually when a company has to downsize, they will let go the senior executive vice president in charge of strategic planning. But they still need someone to vacuum the rugs.”

Stack is optimistic that the needs of aging baby boomers for personal services that cannot be outsourced overseas will create jobs for the disabled. “We need somebody to carry our luggage up the stairs, wash our cars, pick up our groceries,” he said. “People with disabilities are still needed for lots and lots of jobs.”

Community Options still has some vacant office space available for rent, and Stack is hoping that as the current round of corporate layoffs prompts displaced executives to start new businesses, some of these new entrepreneurs will decide to rent office space in one of the organization’s three office buildings.

Most of Community Options’ disabled clients are referred to it by the state Division of Developmental Disabilities, Stack said. Skills >

### Vaseful Flowers and Gifts in New Brunswick employs a disabled worker who is learning to arrange flowers.

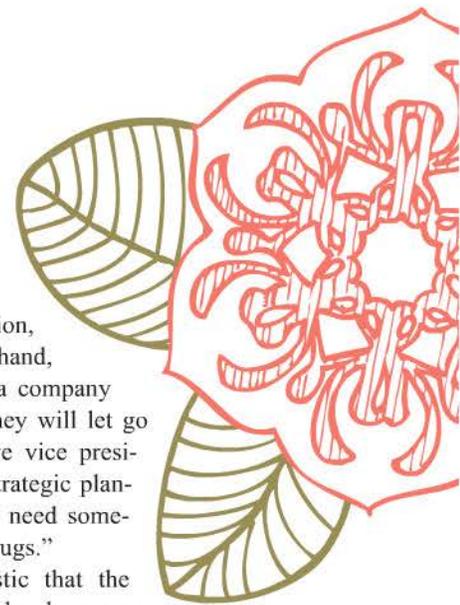
lots of customers, and I introduce myself to them. There are lots of people to talk to, and I’ve made friendships.”

The social benefits of working are enormous for the disabled, Stack said. “We realize that there is a direct relationship between the severity of your disability and your level of loneliness. A lot of people make friendships at their jobs.”

skills, and then find jobs for them with other employers in the community.

The current high level of unemployment hasn’t necessarily hit the disabled harder than the general population, he said.

“One of the biggest myths about people with disabilities is that they are the last hired and the first fired,” Stack said.



Robert Stack



Cedric Ashley



Photos by Christina Marza



Community Options employee, Phil Taylor, left, is about to make a greeting card on the computer and is guided by Alicia Davis, an employment specialist. Taylor works in the copy center and does maintenance around the Daily Plan-It.

training includes computer and telephone work: "Our training is tailored to fit just about anything you want to learn; we can design our programming

around what someone wants to learn how to do," Stack said. "We support any type of developmental disability: mentally retarded, traumatic brain in-

jury, spina bifida, Down syndrome."

The tenants who rent space in the three Daily Plan-It buildings run the gamut: "lawyers, psychotherapists, doctors, Realtors, marketing people — we have one guy that makes robots," Stack said. The Daily Plan-Its can charge a lower rent because of the subsidy provided by state funds, in addition to rent paid by tenants.

Katie Terzian, of West Windsor, who is disabled, works in the copy center at the Princeton Daily Plan-It. She said she can organize files, answer phones, shred paper and clean the office.

Terzian said her Community Options counselor is trying to find her a job with a traditional employer, at which point she will "graduate" from Community Options and enter the mainstream work force. In the meantime, she's happy at Community Options: "It's wonderful here. The people are really nice. I get along with everyone, and you just feel like everyone is trying to help you. They are just like family." +



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