



State grants for vocational job opportunities help disabled adults find meaningful, well-paying work

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By

CRANFORD — Zach Bartosik has already held a couple of jobs, like washing dishes at a cafe for the elderly, but the 18-year-old with autism said the work was too repetitive.

"The jobs weren't very stimulating," Bartosik said.

Now, however, the Scotch Plains teen does a little bit of everything at Green Sports NJ, ringing up purchases, helping customers find what they need and sprucing up the store's used sporting equipment. The shop, in downtown Cranford, was founded by the Arc of Union County, a nonprofit that supports disabled people. Bartosik is just one of a number of adults with developmental disabilities who are finding out how to hold down a steady job at the recently opened store.

"They don't need to be ushered off somewhere secluded away from society. Given the proper training and the proper setting they can do different jobs and contribute," Green Sports NJ manager Damon Cooper said.

Increasingly, small independent businesses are training people with physical and mental disabilities to become a part of the workforce, taking over roles traditionally held by large nonprofits and social services agencies.

Cranford sporting goods store recycles equipment and employs the disabled

Green Sports NJ on North Union Ave in Cranford is a store that sells donated new and used sports equipment. Products sold at Green Sports will be at least 25 percent less expensive than new equipment at the average sports equipment retailer. Individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities are employed in all aspects of this business through The Arc of Union County. (Video by Andre Malok / The Star-Ledger)

From New Jersey to California, the disabled are emerging from the stockrooms and the more menial, hidden jobs in retail and more and more can be found at cash registers, interacting with customers, even delivering flowers.

These types of "social enterprises" started popping up about five years ago, said Joe Strechay, CareerConnect project associate for the American Foundation for the Blind. As a result, national and local advocates say, those with disabilities are not only increasingly more visible but are doing more meaningful work.

Giving the disabled well-paying and personally rewarding works represents a stark turnaround from the 1950s and earlier when the emotionally and developmentally disabled were often warehoused and hidden away from the public.

"The general advice you were given was to put the kid in an institution and forget about them," said Peter Berns, head of the Arc of the United States. "In those days it was assumed that they couldn't be expected to work or couldn't work."

Deplorable hospital conditions and mounting costs, combined with a growing movement to mainstream special needs students into the average classroom, brought about the end of that era. Since then, some disabled adults have been placed in group homes and have gained more independence. But employment remained scarce.

At first, jobs for the disabled were largely relegated to segregated settings known as "sheltered workshops," said Robin Shaffert, senior director of corporate social responsibility at the American Association of People with Disabilities.

Tasks were limited to sweeping floors or stocking back room shelves, said Peter Berns, head of the Arc of the United States, a nonprofit with chapters across New Jersey.



John O'Boyle/The Star-Ledger

Damon Cooper (left), manager of Green Sports NJ in downtown Cranford, shows James Meylor of Westfield how to clean a donated ball. The sports equipment store employs developmentally disabled adults.

"Folks wee stuffing envelopes and putting on stamps," he said.

In New Jersey, a "handful" of these businesses still exist, said Christopher Manente, senior program coordinator for Rutgers University's Douglass Developmental Disabilities Center. However in just the last two years, at least four new shops like Green Sports NJ have opened.

"There's been over the years a real diversification in the types of jobs that are being done," said Berns.

Last week, Rodney Conaway arranged clothes for display on the sales floor of *It's All Good*, a boutique consignment shop that opened in Somerville this month. His work experience there will help land his next job at major retail chain Marshalls, according to officials at Bridges to Employment, who declined to specify his developmental disability.

"I'm just getting ready for the real world," the 21-year-old from Bridgewater said.

"The companies are interested in them, as long as they come with the skills," said Crystal Cunningham, an employment specialist with Bridges to Employment.

There are 7 million people in the nation who are developmentally disabled, Berns said. Of those only about 24 percent are employed.

"A lot of time persons with disabilities have a hard time getting in the door. That's changing," said Strechay. But he added, "it's not changing quite as quickly as we hoped."

Fueling the growth of these businesses is an influx of grant money targeting vocational training for the disabled. Since 2009, the state Department of Labor has used \$7.5 million in federal stimulus money to increase the number of real-life vocational opportunities for people with disabilities.

Community Options, a Princeton-based nonprofit that runs six social enterprises in New Jersey and around the nation, used one of those grants last year to open a tea cafe in Hillsborough called Just Add Water. At another one of its stores, a flower and gift shop in New Brunswick called Vaseful, disabled workers deliver flowers.

State grants last year provided the seed money for Just Add Water, It's All Good and Green Sports, as well as seven other businesses in New Jersey.

Back at Green Sports, Bartosik said he's proud to be working. "It's challenging but not overly demanding," the young man said as he polished a pair of donated skis. "This is definitely a job I can do. Things are going great."

By **Eunice Lee** and **Eugene Paik**/The Star-Ledger

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Enlarge **John O'Boyle / The Star-Ledger**

James Meylor of Westfield organizes donated sports equipment at Green Sports NJ in downtown Cranford. The sports equipment store employs developmentally disabled adults. (John O'Boyle/The Star-Ledger)

Disabled adults find meaningful, well-paying work gallery (3 photos)