

# Dreams blossom at Vaseful flower shop

By **KATHY CHANG**  
Staff Writer

For 17 years, the purpose of Vaseful Flower and Gifts has been two-fold — a full-service retail flower shop that also offers full-time and part-time employment experience for people with a range of disabilities.

The success of the flower business, which provides services to corporations for parties combined with an online presence and customers who just walk into the storefront, prompted a move from New Brunswick to a larger space in Edison at 256 Route 1 north in January.

Vaseful Flower and Gifts in Edison is owned and operated by Community Options, Inc., a national nonprofit organization based in Princeton, whose mission is to provide housing and employment support to people with disabilities.

Melissa Alancourt, manager of the Vaseful program, said the 15 employees in the program develop individual goals that they would like to achieve while at Vaseful.

The employees, Alancourt said, get a wealth of experience through various tasks from helping to make brochures, floral processing and arrangements to answering phones, taking orders, shipping and distribution, money management and helping to deliver the flowers.

Alancourt heads a staff of six — including two support personnel, a full-time floral designer and two drivers — who organize and assist the employees with disabilities.

“Working with the program participants is awesome,” said Alancourt. “It is great to see what they can come up with if you unleash their creativity. The end results are amazing.”

Alancourt said the employees are from the surrounding area not exceeding 10 to 15 miles from Vaseful. She said transportation is provided for employees who need it, adding that some of the employees utilize New Jersey Transit’s Access Link.

Alancourt and Andrew Park, managing director for Community Options Enterprises, said their employees can stay as long as they want, but they do also encourage the participants in the program to seek outside employment.

“Vaseful, to me, is a place where people’s dreams come true,” said Park. “I believe Vaseful is the home of some of the most talented florists in Middlesex County, and they offer our 15 program participants with disabilities at Vaseful hands-on training on how to design a beautiful flower



**Audrey Stymest of New Brunswick, from left, Camille Haque of North Brunswick, Darius Ronkowitz of East Brunswick, Katrina Roussel of Monroe and Mary Santasine of Edison work together at Vaseful Flower and Gifts in Edison, a full-service retail flower shop that also offers full-time and part-time employment experience, providing support as well as camaraderie for people with a range of disabilities.**

arrangement and help run a flower shop.”

Program participants Katrina Roussel, of Monroe, Darius Ronkowitz, of East Brunswick, and Camille Haque, of North Brunswick, spoke about their goals with Vaseful.

Roussel said she came to Vaseful to gain customer service and money management skills at the same time learning how to process flowers.

Ronkowitz explained that his duties include cleaning and clearing the countertops and bathrooms. He said he is interested in the customer service aspect of the business. “This is a nice environment,” he said, adding that he has experience with flowers and gardening working in a garden when he was growing up.

Haque said Vaseful provides a fun environment where she can hone her skills in computers. She said she has additional goals of learning how to cook.

Audrey Stymest, of New Brunswick, and Mary Santasine, of Edison, have both worked at Vaseful since it opened in New Brunswick.

“I like the people here,” said Stymest, explaining why she has stayed so long and adding that she enjoys processing the flowers.

Santasine said along with processing flowers, she enjoys the trips to deliver the flowers.

Community Options, Inc., has been in

operation since 1989 developing housing and employment programs for people with disabilities and serving thousands of people through 38 offices across 10 states.

Vaseful is just one of a few entrepreneurial businesses operated in New Jersey by Community Options to train and employ people with disabilities, providing support as well as camaraderie, while earning minimum wage or better.

Presents of Mind is a boutique gift shop located in Morris County’s Flanders, where individuals learn customer relations skills and inventory management.

Community Options also utilizes three complete office, conference and copy centers, known as the Daily Plan It, which provide tenancy to various small businesses. Individuals there receive training in clerical work and customer service. They are located in Princeton, Moorestown and Morristown.

Park said they have a close relationship with the state, noting that the organization receives referrals from the state Division of Developmental Disabilities.

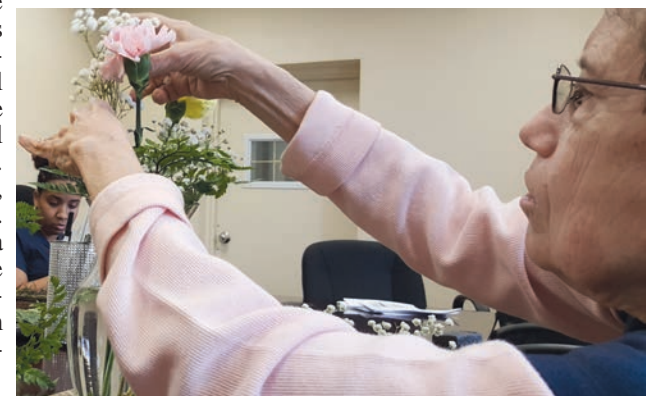
For more information visit [www.comop.org](http://www.comop.org).



**Camille Haque prepares ferns for flower arrangements.**



**Darius Ronkowitz, left, and Katrina Roussel prepare flower arrangements.**



**Mary Santasine puts the finishing touches on an arrangement.**

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