

80 Percent Unemployment Rate, 100 PERCENT DEDICATION

By DYLAN VALIC



In the challenging landscape of employment, adults on the Autism Spectrum face an uphill battle, with estimates from the World Health Organization suggesting an unemployment rate exceeding 80 percent.

However, within this disheartening statistic lies an opportunity for change, and communities like Port Washington are actively shaping a brighter future for their neurodiverse members.

Port Washington is home to Spectrum Designs Foundation, a nonprofit custom apparel company that empowers individuals with disabilities. What started as a small venture with just two employees working out of a backyard barn has become a flourishing enterprise with two locations, employing more than 70 people, with 60 percent identifying as being on the Autism Spectrum.

Within Spectrum's walls, you can find a magnitude of different stories, each showcasing the unique strengths and talents of adults on the Autism Spectrum.

Billy, Greg, and Adem are all local Port Washington residents who live and work together. Money from their paychecks goes toward their joint house and supporting local businesses.

They enjoy working out at the gym, eating lunch at the local deli, and seeing the newest movie. Their jobs have allowed them to become members of the Port Washington community, and give back to the town they were raised in.

"I like working at Spectrum," Billy said excitedly. "I can make money and be with friends."

For Greg's parents, watching their son flourish has been one of the greatest gifts they could ask for.

"I think Spectrum gives Gregory a reason to get out of bed every morning," John Beyer, Greg's father, said. "He has a job to go to, and even though he doesn't make a lot of conversation, he loves to be around other people and do different things, and he loves to be productive."

Merely a few blocks from their residence, another Port Washington local, Spencer, has found success through Spectrum Designs. Starting as a part-time grocery bagger, Spencer aspired to do more. Today, he not only operates machinery that produces apparel for companies like Google and Microsoft, but also teaches his peers how to use the same equipment.

"For me, the greatest part of my job is being able to teach my coworkers new skills," Spencer said. "It makes me feel like I not only did something positive for that individual but for the community as a whole."

Spencer is able to see the talents that his fellow neurodivergent coworkers possess, but unfortunately, that talent is often overlooked by mainstream society.

Kelli's journey to Spectrum began as a part-time employee after facing rejection at a workout studio due to her difficulty with eye contact. "I was prepared for the interview, and I was ready, but within five minutes, they turned me down because I couldn't make eye contact," she said.

Kelli was able to prove her talent and dedication and has recently been promoted to being in charge of Spectrum's social media content, making her the voice of the company.

"Because of Spectrum, I'm now able to work full time," she said. "I've made so many friends that are like family, and it's given me a great sense of accomplishment."

Patrick Bardsley, co-founder and CEO of Spectrum Designs, appreciates the incredible talent his team has nurtured.

"When someone like Kelli comes to you, and you see the talent they possess, it almost makes you feel lucky someone else missed it," Patrick said.

Patrick has been working with the team since the beginning and has had the privilege of witnessing their growth firsthand.

"When you come in and see someone working independently on a task they weren't able to do at all when they first came here, it makes you feel incredible," he said. "They are not only learning job skills, they are learning skills that will stay with them their entire life, and that's priceless."

Spectrum Designs isn't the only business embracing neurodiversity. In recent years, companies of all sizes have increasingly hired neurodiverse workers, recognizing the immense value in talents that might have been overlooked in the past.

Stories like these, once improbable, are now becoming reality. While the unemployment rate is unacceptably high, Spectrum hopes for a brighter future that embraces neurodiversity and recognizes diverse talent is on the horizon.

SPECTRUM DESIGNS

Merchandise That *Transforms* Lives

Shirts • Hats • Backpacks • Tote bags
Promotional Products & More!

Every order supports our mission of creating Autism Employment.

SpectrumDesigns.org (516) 767-7187