

Extraordinary Ventures Creates Extraordinary Opportunities

By Gregg Ireland and
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Extraordinary Ventures

Government is an important employer in our economy, but by far the largest source of jobs is the private sector made up of hundreds of thousands of small, medium and large businesses. But neither government nor private enterprise has done a very good job incorporating the skills and talents of adults with autism and other intellectual challenges into American mainstream economy. Unemployment facing adults on the spectrum remains at an alarming rate of 80-90%! It is a shame and we can do better.

Turning the situation around is not easy. It requires new ways of thinking and renewed focus and commitment of the parties involved - government, business, families, individuals. It will take risk taking, and who is better for that task than the American small business community or the great American entrepreneur? We need new ideas and business models to tap into the strengths of what to date is largely an ignored, disenfranchised group in our society. One such promising new entrepreneurial model that has come on the scene in recent years is Extraordinary Ventures.

In Chapel Hill North Carolina, Extraordinary Ventures (EV) owns and operates a portfolio of five small business platforms: laundry, office services, pet services, transit bus cleaning and gifts. The businesses are organized and managed by a team of young start-up artists whose goals are to develop sustainable businesses and provide ideal employment opportunities for people with autism. EV makes liberal use of behavioral techniques from the University of North Carolina TEACCH Autism Program including job flow diagrams, colorful work charts and picture schedules. The jobs are inclusive. The employees are responsible for many tasks that keep them active in the community—for example, picking up and delivering laundry to customers, working alongside bus drivers and maintenance personnel in the cleaning operation, and running errands such as picking up finished jobs at the printer and delivering batches of letters to the Post Office in office services. The result is a happy, prosperous and growing workforce of 55 individuals, ranging from age 18 to 65.



EVNY successfully launches it's candle business

Extraordinary Ventures in Chapel Hill (EVNC, www.extraordinaryventures.org) is in its eighth year. While it is no longer a pure startup, every facet of the business continues to grow and develop. Importantly, the capital requirement is modest and while the enterprise is not yet profitable as a whole, donations for this non-profit operation account for around 20% of the revenues needed to meet the budget. After 8 years, the total investment made to create 55 great jobs amounts to less than one-half of a year of college tuition per employee. It's a great value for the people and for society.

Turning their attention to the rest of the country, EV has formed partnerships with organizations in New York, Michigan, California and Atlanta. A New York based group, founded over twenty years ago by a group of parents was one of the first to sign up.

The Foundation for Empowering Citizens with Autism (FECA, www.fecainc.org), located in Westchester County outside of New York City has for over two decades been fulfilling its mission of providing programs for children and adults with autism, often by working through partnerships with area service providers. FECA's educational conferences in the early days introduced the evidence-based and powerfully impactful Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) theories and practice to the metropolitan New York area at time when autism

was often still being treated as a psychological disorder.

A long standing partnership with the Devereux Foundation led to the establishment of the ABA-based Devereux Millwood Learning Center and as the population aged, the program was expanded to serve the need for vocational and community inclusion programming. A day habilitation program was the next project which became the Devereux Adult Program. When it became abundantly clear that area day habilitation programs needed help in finding new and expanded volunteer and potential employment sites for adults, FECA established the Opportunity Network for Employers and Employees (ONEE) and began the painstaking process of knocking on doors throughout Westchester.

Though ONEE has proven successful, it also reinforced the understanding that turning volunteer tasks into job opportunities was a daunting challenge for a local job market that lacked the ability and often the will to fit the proverbial square peg into a round hole. Even the most sympathetic employers are simply not equipped to provide the requisite work-related training and support necessary for adults on the spectrum.

The FECA board was intrigued with the EV model precisely because the individual skills required within each business match the inherent and eminently trainable talents and interests of individuals with autism. Delighted to be chosen as a replication site,

FECA provided the start up funding for the creation of a nonprofit corporation which last year became Extraordinary Ventures New York (EVNY, www.evny.org).

The task of hiring our first social entrepreneur was a challenging one and as the months passed, the EVNY board looked to the Nike logo of "Just Do It" for inspiration. A free basement, a ping pong table and a starter kit led to the creation of festively decorated and seasonally inspired candles packaged by a production crew who took to the task with surprising agility and enthusiasm. The experiment, which required relatively little initial financial outlay, further emphasized a critical piece of the EV model: test to ensure that this is something our potential employees CAN and WANT to do!

Rather than anonymously selling the candles online or convincing a local store to sell the product, EVNY decided to take the candles out into the community at local craft and gift fairs. That decision led to the creation of a team of charming salespeople thus expanding the repertoire of job opportunities to match the extensive range of skills and talents inherent to adults on the spectrum. Several craft venues later and EVNY's first business was launched.

Our first entrepreneur recently joined the team in February along with a part time sales development manager with extensive experience working with adults on the spectrum. The mentorship of the skilled and now extensively experienced team of entrepreneurs at EVNC is an enormous asset of support and counsel as EVNY looks to expand our first business and new ideas lead to the creation of additional ventures.

As adults, work inevitably defines us. It's a statement to the world of what we, as individuals, are capable of, where we fit in society and how we are recognized and valued. The Extraordinary Ventures model provides the opportunity to explore and experiment with a range of skills within a supportive environment that provides training towards future independence; all, while valuing time and effort with the simple but profoundly important earning of a paycheck.

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