

Dreams of disabled workers, families blooming at garden center

By Sherri Dauskurdas

In West Chicago, an idea is growing. It's the idea that people with developmental disabilities can provide a valuable service to the greater community, if only given the chance.

In 2001 a group of families concerned about the lack of job opportunities for their disabled sons and daughters, struggled to find jobs for challenged teens and young adults. They were looking for employment that was hands-on, easily adaptable and offered varied work for a breadth of skill levels.

In 2004, it all came to fruition as the We Grow Dreams Garden Center and Greenhouse was formed.

"A greenhouse was a labor-intensive type of business," said Laurie Staple, who serves as a spokesperson and a human resources committee member. "There are lots of different jobs, simple small jobs like potting plants and watering to bigger more complicated tasks involving machinery."

The parents searched out and purchased an existing greenhouse in West Chicago, which had been out of use for some time. Today, the We Grow Dreams Greenhouse offers retail and wholesale garden products, plants and accessories to



At the We Grow Dreams Garden Center in West Chicago, developmentally challenged team members like (from left) Angelina Finato, Kayla Stentsrom and Brittany Spedale learn job skills and earn a paycheck.

customers, with disabled team members working alongside volunteers and greenhouse staff. They earn a paycheck as they learn a trade, and interact with staff and customers.

"Team members learn a variety of jobs across the greenhouse," Staple said. "There are more than 40 different tasks that have been identified."

Each team members family volunteers 10 hours each month to the greenhouse, working as job coaches, giving guidance and support to team members while they are learning the jobs.

One of the greatest joys for Staple is when she sees a team member move on to other employment.

"We had one young man who learned so much, he went on to another landscaping job with a local business," Staple said. "It's great to see when someone gains enough skills and confidence to move on."

Staple said the goal is to serve as a model to the State of Illinois, and hopefully encourage the formation of more businesses structured to give opportunities to disabled young adults.

The We Grow Dreams Garden Center employs a staff of 60 team members, plus a professional greenhouse staff.

Staple said businesses can contribute dollars, time as trained job coaches on special greenhouse projects, and even support the garden center with contracts for landscaping and gardening services. There are also sponsorship opportunities at We Grow Dreams fundraisers.

"We are grateful for all kinds of support," said Staple.

Team members start off learning simple greenhouse tasks. Stentsrom, far right, fills pots for sale while Spedale puts together signs for the greenhouse. Duties increase in difficulty based on experience and skill level.

Quick Facts

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