

Neighbor

Nurturing more than just plants

Autistic man flourishes at We Grow Dreams

Each weekend thousands of people take to the streets of our communities, walking and running to raise money for charities. Every one of them has found a cause to believe in, a bit of hope through helping. And every one of them has a reason for being there.

On Saturday, Oct. 9, hundreds of people likely will walk to support We Grow Dreams, a not-for-profit organization that provides vocational training for people with disabilities.

Why we walk

Our causes, our stories

At the We Grow Dreams Greenhouse and Garden Center in West Chicago, people with disabilities develop job skills while helping to grow and sell a variety of plants, as well as making and selling hand-crafted items. This year, the We Grow Dreams Garden Market at Freedom Commons in Naperville has expanded the learning opportunities, allowing team members to practice skills in a retail environment.

Ben Dose is among the We Grow Dreams team members who helps at the greenhouse and the weekly Garden Market. Today, his mother, Ofra Dose of Western Springs, explains why the opportunities through We Grow Dreams make her son happy.

Our son Ben is 20 and has severe autism. He has very little speech and suffers from sensory problems, particularly hyperacute hearing. He has many gastrointestinal difficulties and must stay on a very restricted diet at all times. Despite this, he is a sweet and loving person and one who is very happy when he is active. He loves the outdoors, and even though he walks slowly, he likes to walk.

Our family has been a part of the We Grow Dreams family for about two years. We are so thrilled to have found this organization that provides Ben

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COURTESY OF OFRA DOSE

Ben Dose, who has autism, likes working with plants and composting at the We Grow Dreams Greenhouse in West Chicago. He enjoys the hard work and the camaraderie with We Grow Dreams team members, volunteers and staff.

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Bar coding system: Would allow more team members to participate in retail sales activities, create new job skills for team members of labeling codes on products. Team members would learn skills transferable to other community job sites. Cost: \$20,000.

Updated computers and monitors, printer ink: All are donated and do not have updated features that would be more efficient for team member use in making greenhouse signage and maintaining our mailing list database. Cost: \$3,000.

Funding for paid job coaches for team members: The majority of team members have a family member as their job coach. By hiring two job coaches — one full time and one part time — team members would develop greater job independence and transfer skills to different work situations and staff. With this additional help, we also would be able to expand the program by offering vocational assessments, goal-setting and review, and development of resume portfolios that team members could take to potential employers in their community. Cost: \$60,000

We Grow Dreams Fall Fest Weekend

We Grow Dreams has several events happening as part of its Fall Fest Weekend Saturday and Sunday, Oct. 9 and 10. For information, call (630) 293-0100 or visit wegrowdreams.org.

4K Walk for Dreams

When: Registration begins at 7:30 a.m. Saturday, Oct. 9; walk begins at 8:30 a.m.

Where: Freedom Commons, Route 88 and Diehl Road, Naperville

Details: Walk is open to all ages, strollers, wheelchairs, wagons, pets on leashes, families and corporate teams

Cost: \$25 adults, \$10 children younger than 10

Garden Market

When: 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. Saturdays, Oct. 9 and 16

Where: Freedom Commons

Details: Mums, hanging baskets, cabbage, kale, pumpkins and gourds, fall and Halloween decorations, gift items handcrafted by team members

Fall Open House

When: 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. Sunday, Oct. 10

Where: We Grow Dreams Greenhouse & Garden Center, 1055 W. Washington St., West Chicago

Details: Market items for sale; ADOPT Pet Shelter on hand with dogs and cats available for adoption; raffle; pumpkin painting

Other needs: Plastic stack chairs for our multipurpose area; plastic storage bins, shoe box size or larger; lightweight bowling balls; garden stakes; bird houses to paint; cedar boards for making bird feeders; hand tools, drill bits; large cooler with drain plug

Gravel: To fill in areas around trailers that flood and freeze, making access to restrooms, team office and craft areas difficult. Cost: \$24/ton, grade 8 gravel; one truck carries 10 tons.

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COURTESY OF OFRA DOSE

Ben Dose works at the We Grow Dreams Garden Market as well as at the organization's Greenhouse and Garden Center in West Chicago, where he and other team members learn job skills.

Dreams: Program teaches more than just job skills

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with vocational training and a job for his abilities in all seasons. He is valued by the staff for his hard work and he truly enjoys going to the We Grow Dreams greenhouse each week. His jobs have varied from composting to moving plants to different locations, to filling pots with soil. He is always very happy to do these tasks. He also enjoys the camaraderie of the other participants, whether at work or the picnics.

Another unexpected benefit

we, his mom and dad, have received has been the opportunity to be with other parents of young adults with disabilities. It is so comfortable to be around other people who totally understand how it feels to parent a special-needs child. When Ben was growing up, we often felt so isolated since we could not go to the movies or concerts or eat at many restaurants. This was especially hard for our daughter, Ben's older sister. Since Ben started working at We Grow Dreams, our daughter has come to help Ben and to take photos of Ben

working. Ben loves to see photos of himself, and he looks at the pictures of himself moving a cart with plants or composting plants.

Ben is obtaining many useful vocational skills at We Grow Dreams. He has been learning to punch his timecard in a clock when he arrives and when he is done. He has been learning numerous job skills and gets a chance to practice them in a more relaxed atmosphere with the help of his job coach, who is either Mom or Dad. He is clearly very happy to be at We Grow Dreams.

We Grow Dreams' wish list

Operating funds: Due to the seasonal nature of our business, our incoming revenue dwindles January through April, although we continue to provide job training services during this time. We request contributions to support our program in these reduced-income months. Your support will ensure that we do not have to cut back on any of our services during the winter months. Donors will be recognized on our website and in our newsletter.

a year.

Craft supplies: Our craft sessions are led by volunteers, parents of team members, who also donate materials for our craft products; card stock,

Multipurpose building: A new structure would provide evaluation and training space for team members, craft area with storage, meeting room for quarterly family meetings, and office training areas. Cost: \$500,000.

card embellishments, paint, artificial flowers among the many items donated. Cost: \$1,500.

Outside storage building: To house landscaping tools used by team members working on our grounds and flower beds. Cost: \$3,000.

Scholarship Fund: To assist individuals with disabilities who cannot afford to participate in the job training program. Cost: \$1,800 a year.