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CORPORATE CITIZENSHIP AWARDS 2026



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TNC CHOCOLATE LAB / THE NICHOLAS CENTER

The Nicholas Center, founded in 2011, is a Port Washington human service agency supporting autistic individuals through vocational training, supported employment, community projects and opportunities for peer connection. It now employs 150 people and has built a reputation for expanding what work and community engagement look like for autistic adults, a population that faces 85% unemployment and underengagement once school ends at age 21.

That mission took physical form in 2024 with the opening of TNC Chocolate Lab and Gift Shop, a social enterprise business of The Nicholas Center. In under two years, the Main Street storefront has become a working classroom where 36 autistic adults train weekly in culinary arts, retail operations, custom order fulfillment and customer service. Several training participants have since moved into paid staff roles. Long Island Business News named TNC Chocolate Lab one of its Best Startup Businesses of 2025, recognition that reflects both its commercial traction and its role as a public expression of The Nicholas Center's work.

The shop's output has matched its ambition. Over the past year, the team produced and fulfilled more than 60,000 chocolate units and 2,000 hand-poured candles, all made by

autistic adults. TNC Chocolate Lab has also become a source of local philanthropy, donating products and gift baskets to more than 30 nonprofit organizations and schools to support their fundraising efforts. Its Holiday Pop-Up events draw foot traffic that benefits neighboring small businesses on Main Street, and the shop's contribution to the local economy and community has drawn recognition from a North Hempstead councilwoman and the village mayor.

The Nicholas Center maintains a 100% engagement rate for participants after they age out of the school system at 21, aiming to replace social isolation with continued professional opportunity. Looking ahead, the organization plans to grow its vocational program from 36 to 50 weekly participants, an expansion founder Stella L. Spanakos ties directly to the organization's core focus on community connection. The center is also pursuing purchase of the building that currently houses TNC Chocolate Lab, a move intended to secure the shop's long-term presence on Main Street and allow rent savings to be reinvested in participant wages and program growth. It is also pursuing larger corporate accounts to show that a neurodiverse workforce can fulfill large-scale commercial orders.



Congratulations!

T•N•C
Chocolate Lab

2026 Nonprofit of the Year

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**TNC Chocolate Lab — a unique chocolate & gift shop offering
Autistic adults community, training and jobs.**

**tncchocolatelab.org
516.767.2152**

