

Chocolate Lab celebrates a sweet 1st year

Enterprise by Nicholas Center offers vocational training to empower autistic adults

BY LARSEN PUGH

The Nicholas Center Chocolate Lab marked its first year in operation on Dec. 16, celebrating what leaders and families described as a milestone in creating meaningful employment opportunities for autistic adults while becoming a growing presence in the local business and nonprofit community.

The Chocolate Lab, a social enterprise of The Nicholas Center, opened in December 2021 with a mission to address the rising employment gap facing autistic adults, nearly 80% of whom are unemployed or underemployed after aging out of the school system.

In its first year, the Port Washington-based program has emerged as a model for combining vocational training, business development and community outreach.

"This is more than a gift shop," said Nicole Spensky, executive director and co-founder of The Nicholas Center. "It's proof that ability creates economic value. Every handcrafted piece of chocolate purchased directly supports our mission to create genuine opportunities, securing a life of independence and dignity for autistic adults."

The Chocolate Lab provides hands-on vocational training in culinary arts and retail operations to more than 30 autistic adults each week. Participants learn chocolate production, packaging, inventory management and customer service in a real-world business setting. The program has already resulted in new participants being hired directly into the lab's focus on employability and skill-building. During its inaugural year, the Chocolate Lab also gained strong support from Port Washington, Long Island Business News named the mission a "best business idea," citing its focus on workforce development and social impact. The products are now sold at local shops across Long Island, the Hudson Valley and the Capital Region and were featured at the Taste NY Marketplace at the New York State Fair.

The business has also resulted itself as a popular source

for corporate gifting, particularly during the holiday season, offering chocolate and gift boxes that appeal to companies seeking socially responsible products.

The inaugural celebration drew families, local officials, nonprofit partners and supporters, many of whom credited the lab's success to the vision of

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Spensky. Founder Nicole Spensky said the organization grew out of her experience as the mother of Nicholas, her 15-year-old son, who is profoundly affected by autism.

"When the school bus stops, that's the call," Spensky said. "I didn't see what came next for so many kids with autism, including my own. This is the solution of providing us do—teaching skills, creating purpose and building community."

A former educator, Spensky helped develop special

education programming in Westchester before founding The Nicholas Center more than 15 years ago. She said the Chocolate Lab represents the next evolution of that work—a social enterprise designed not only to create participants, but to employ them in a sustainable business.

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There is work and there is," she said. "This is a living miracle." The lab's products are distributed through various channels, including chocolate-covered products and confections, along with candies, t-shirts and other items designed for program participants. Spensky said the enterprise also provides individuals with training skills while also building confidence and independence.

Representatives from a local food pantry described how Nicholas Center participants regularly help package and

deliver supplies, calling them "part of us." Local officials said the Chocolate Lab has strengthened ties between the nonprofit, business and municipal sectors.

Westchester Mayor John Spanio said the village worked closely with the lab during its opening. "Whatever the village could do to help get the business going, we did," he said. "We listen and what she has become is incredible. It's a major boost for the village."

Several speakers at the event highlighted how the Chocolate Lab's impact extends beyond employment, serving as an educational tool for the broader community. Speakers included

Assemblymember Joseph P. Lupo, Westchester County Executive George Pataki, North Westchester Town Supervisor Jennifer DeSantis, Legislator Delta Padgett-Whitman, a representative from the lab's business partners, and a representative for Council Member Western Buchanan.

Spensky said the organization has hopes to expand outreach by welcoming youth groups to learn about chocolate-making while also having conversations about autism and inclusion.

"We about changing how people see autism," she said. "That takes a long time and understanding."

The anniversary celebration

also included the presentation of a \$1,000 donation from the David Lucie Foundation, underscoring what leaders described as strong local support.

Spensky said the lab's growth has been fueled by a series of small but meaningful moments, early donations, partnerships and encouragement that helped turn an idea into a flourishing business.

"We didn't have the money to start," she said, reflecting on early challenges that shaped the program to purchase equipment and begin experimenting with products. "Our little mistakes led to success."

Looking ahead, the lab's leaders said they plan to expand programming, deepen community partnerships and continue developing products, all while keeping the focus on meaningful employment.

"There is a place and a purpose for everybody," Spensky said. "We're not accepting that 80% statistic."

The Nicholas Center Chocolate Lab is located in Port Washington and is open to the public. Proceeds from sales support The Nicholas Center's broader mission to empower individuals with autism to live independently, fulfilling lives.



The Nicholas Center Chocolate Lab was awarded \$1,000 at the 1st anniversary celebration.