

Recognized as emerging leader under 30

Nicholas Center's Dimaris Burton honored for career assistance to adults with autism

BY LARISSA FUENTES

Damaris Burton, workforce development director at The Nicholas Center, was recognized as an emerging leader under 30 by Long Island Business News, highlighting her dedication to creating meaningful employment opportunities for adults on the autism spectrum.

The award, presented at a reception on Aug. 4, celebrates young professionals under 30 who demonstrate professional accomplishment, community service, and strong leadership in the Long Island area.

Burton, who turned 30 in July, grew up in Port Washington and began her professional journey in a setting far from the non-profit world. She worked as a manager at Soundview Cinemas, where she first encountered the Nicholas Center. Volunteers from the Center, known as Navigators, would come to the theater to gain work experience, and Burton became their go-to supervisor for tasks and guidance.

"It was really through that experience that I got to know the organization," Burton said. "The person I interacted with

the most, Brooke Mollett, who is now my supervisor and senior program director at The Nicholas Center, noticed that I had patience and skills in supporting these young adults. She suggested I consider working for The Nicholas Center."

Despite initial apprehension about working with neurodiverse populations, Burton applied and was hired in 2019 as a job coach. In this role, she supported participants at Spectrum Designs and Spectrum SUD, partner organizations whose mission is to employ and provide volunteer opportunities to adults on the autism spectrum. Job coaches assist participants with maintaining focus, managing schedules, and navigating workplace challenges.

Over the next five years, Burton moved up the ranks, first becoming a supported employment supervisor, then senior workforce supervisor, and eventually director of workforce development. In her current position, she oversees workforce programs at both The Nicholas Center's Port Washington and Pleasantville locations. Her responsibilities include training job coaches, coordinating with social enterprises, managing



Dimaris Burton, director of workforce development at The Nicholas Center, was honored as an Emerging Leader Under 30.

volunteers, and ensuring program participants have opportunities to work meaningful jobs. She also manages extended hours for after-school programs to maximize access to work experience.

Burton said her work is deeply personal and rewarding.

"I love supporting adults on the spectrum, especially in a work environment. It's meaningful because around 80% of adults with autism aren't employed. Many

never even get the opportunity, so being able to advocate and create these chances is something I'm very passionate about," she said.

The Emerging Leader Under 30 Award is particularly meaningful to Burton because it recognizes her professional accomplishments and community impact. Colleagues at The Nicholas Center nominated her, and she described the honor as "humbling and motivating."

"It made me feel like I am doing what I should be, and it encourages me to continue seeing what else I can do within my role," she said.

Nicole Ferrara, co-founder and executive director of The Nicholas Center, praised Burton's leadership and dedication.

"Dimaris has made significant contributions to our organization's success and expansion. Under her guidance, we have seen a substantial increase in the number of young adults with autism gaining meaningful employment," Ferrara said in a press release.

The Nicholas Center, founded in 2006, has transformed the way autistic individuals learn, live, and work. The organization

offers vocational training, supported employment, and community projects to foster independence and professional growth. By creating pathways to employment and life skills development, the Center has become a model for community-based support for neurodiverse adults.

Burton's journey also reflects a broader trend of young professionals pursuing careers that combine social impact with career growth. She originally studied psychology at SUNY Cortland and envisioned a path in counseling or social work. Her unexpected entry into workforce development, however, allowed her to channel her skills into advocacy, mentorship, and organizational leadership.

"This is not just a job for me," Burton said. "I am part of such an incredible community that is focused on growth, awareness, and advocacy. Being recognized for this work is a true honor, but the real reward is seeing the adults we support succeed in meaningful careers."

For more information about The Nicholas Center and its programs, visit TNCNewYork.org or TNCChocolate.org.

BUSINESS NEWS

TNC Chocolate Lab named Best Startup Businesses

In 1st year chocolatier gains extensive client list with mainly autistic workforce

TNC Chocolate Lab, a Port Washington-based chocolatier with a mission to employ autistic individuals, has been named one of Long Island Business News' Best Startup Businesses of 2025.

The shop, located at 195 Manorhaven Blvd., opened less than a year ago and has already built a client list that includes Northwell Health, Landmark on Main Street, Sands Point Preserve, Neiman Marcus and a range of custom orders.

The award recognizes businesses "creating momentum and carving out space in competitive markets," according to the publication.

PHOTO PROVIDED BY THE NICHOLAS CENTER



TNC Chocolate Lab in Port Washington was named one of Long Island Business News' Best Startups of 2025.

Founded by The Nicholas Center, a nonprofit serving autistic individuals, TNC Chocolate Lab offers vocational training and supported employment to address high rates of unemployment and underemployment in the autistic community, a figure the organization says reaches 85%.

"My son, Nicholas inspired me to create a social enterprise to offer vocational training and job opportunities for Autistic individuals," said Stella L. Spanakos, co-founder and PR coordinator for The Nicholas Center. "This often-marginalized population has so much to offer and the desire to do so! We

created a business model that successfully integrates individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities in a work setting."

The shop's chocolates and candles are featured at Taste NY's Long Island Visitor's Center, with plans to expand to additional Taste NY locations, its website and the New York State Fair.

The Nicholas Center develops programs and services to help autistic individuals learn, live and work in their communities. More information is available at TNCNewYork.org and TNCchocolatelab.org.