

PORT WASHINGTON

A RECIPE FOR SUCCESS

How adult volunteers with autism keep a new chocolate shop going strong

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It was three weeks before Valentine's Day, and the kitchen of Port Washington's newest chocolate shop was abuzz.

Kayanne Kresic, the coordinator of culinary arts at The Nicholas Center, which operates the TNC Chocolate Lab on Manorhaven Boulevard, whizzed around the room, from station to station, offering instructions to the volunteers.

"I recommend putting that tray in the refrigerator," Kresic said to one volunteer. "And getting more chocolate for your basin."

The volunteers are all participants at The Nicholas Center, a Port Washington-based nonprofit that offers vocational training, supported employment and community engagement for adults with autism. The Chocolate Lab, which is a nonprofit social enterprise, is the latest, most delicious, outgrowth of that mission. It's Kresic's job to keep all of the participants on task — she has a business to run, after all — while empowering them to feel confident in their work.

"I walk in here on a mission, and my mission is for everybody to leave here happy, and proud of themselves," Kresic said. "And chocolating happens here, too."

The Nicholas Center was founded in 2011 by Stella Spanakos, Nicole Ferrara and Patrick Bardsley. Spanakos' son, Nicholas, was about to age out of the school system and she felt moved to create a space to help better integrate adults with autism into the community.

A sweet development

The Center partners with at least 25 nonprofits spread across Port Washington and Westchester, such as animal shelters and animal preserves, where participants perform daily responsibilities while building life skills, said Lee Anne Vetrone, the Center's director of development. The Center's 165 participants also attend emotional and social development programs, work at local businesses and participate in in-house activities like an art



Emily, left, Phillip, Kayanne Kresic, culinary arts coordinator at The Nicholas Center, and Cara make chocolate treats at TNC Chocolate Lab.

The TNC Chocolate Lab

■ **Port Washington's newest chocolate shop** is operated by the nonprofit Nicholas Center, which offers vocational training and other opportunities for adults with autism.

■ **The shop, which opened last month**, operates out of a roughly 2,700-square-foot space on Manorhaven Boulevard, and its volunteer staff are participants in the Center.

■ **Around 20 participants cycle through** the Chocolate Shop every week, according to the Center's coordinator of culinary arts.

program.

In April 2023, the Center launched a culinary arts program, with Kresic, a former restaurant employee, teaching participants how to make chocolate. Soon, the parents of participants were placing orders for work parties and baby showers.

"It organically grew," Vetrone said. "We realized very quickly this was something that could develop into a social enterprise . . . which folds in, of course, culinary arts training and skills, and also produces a product we can now sell."



Isaac puts T-shirts on a shelf with Center employee Mary Kroner.

The Chocolate Lab operates out of a roughly 2,700-square-foot space formerly occupied by Andy's Pizza & Restaurant. The front of the building has a retail area with chocolate for sale, as well as a large gathering area for participants the Center plans to make available to local groups. The shop is exclusively staffed by people who are Center participants, and other organization employees assist in tasks.

Since the shop opened Dec. 18, the crew has focused on preparing orders for Valentine's Day. Customers can purchase baskets including combinations of chocolate-covered snacks, along with teddy bears, and

aprons and shirts made by Center participants.

Kresic said around 20 participants cycle through the chocolate shop every week. The goal, Vetrone said, is to one day hire a participant to be an employee.

'Let the individual blossom'

On a late January morning, four volunteers were hard at work in the kitchen. Three members sat behind vats of chocolate, dressed in long, white coats and nets over their hair. They dunked graham crackers, Oreo cookies and pretzels in the chocolate and placed them on the tray before covering them with red sprinkles. An-

other volunteer, on a break, sat in the corner, writing. One volunteer stood as he dunked the crackers into the chocolate, smiling and singing to himself.

Kresic, in an interview, said she wants the volunteers "to feel self-assured, confident, safe, proud, like they could be themselves."

"If someone is reacting to someone else's vocalizations, or someone else's music, they have the freedom to react in the way they want to react," she said.

Later in the afternoon, another volunteer sat with her legs folded beneath her knees, explaining her process to a visitor. One by one, she dropped cookies into the basin, and once they were covered in chocolate, scooped them out with a fork. She held the fork over the basin and tapped it repeatedly as the excess chocolate dripped down.

The Center has placed 43 individuals in various businesses through its supported employment program, Vetrone said. The hope is that the Chocolate Lab will help produce more.

"There's a staff member that goes with the individual," she said. "They're learning the skills together, with the goal of the staff member slowly stepping back to let the individual blossom."