

DEFYING ALL ODDS

REED Foundation Paves The Way For Education and Independence

By MEGAN MONTEMARANO



All it takes is one small idea and a whole lot of passion to achieve something great. When it comes to parents and their children, this passion knows no bounds. The Bergen County community experienced this first-hand back in 2003, when a small group of parents came together to create opportunities for their children, all of whom were recently diagnosed with autism. In response to the lack of appropriate educational facilities available, they created a small private school for autistic kids known as REED Academy.

Now educating over 40 students in a one-on-one setting, the private, non-profit facility in Oakland utilizes applied behavior analysis by dedicated teachers, clinical professionals, and board-certified behavior analysts. Education at REED Academy, for students ages three to 21, is funded through the department of education. But it doesn't end there. To keep the momentum going beyond school years, this idea soon expanded into REED Foundation for Autism, which now serves as the fundraising arm and active incubator for new ideas and programs.

Established in 2016, the REED Foundation for Autism strives to provide resources and support to people with autism throughout their entire lifetime. Under the leadership of current CEO Chantelle Walker, the foundation consistently pushes beyond what must be done to explore what they believe can be done. One in 54 Americans are diagnosed with autism each year, with rates continuing to rise. Therefore, the need to relentlessly pursue innovative solutions to help autistic children on their journey to adulthood has never been more urgent.

Acknowledging this reality, the REED Foundation launched the next phase of their organization with a program called REED Next Day. This is designed for adults with autism over the age of 21, helping them to achieve greater independence and live a meaningful and fulfilling life. Closely following, the foundation opened its first residential home in 2019, welcoming four adults with autism into a warm and supervised setting. There are currently two homes and one apartment in operation under the REED Next Residence program. Although all of this was a tremendous accomplishment, the “work” aspect of REED’s “learn,

live, work and thrive” mission was still missing — where would they find appropriate paid employment for these individuals?

One of the leading issues for adults with autism is the lack of employment opportunities. In fact, nearly half of all 25-year-olds with autism have never held a paying job. Greens Do Good, an indoor hydroponic vertical farm in Hackensack, offers the opportunity to work alongside farmers, allowing autistic individuals to develop essential skills, achieve greater independence, and gain purposeful work experience that positively impacts the community. This program is supported by a grant from the NJ Department of Health and through the sales of produce to restaurants, grocery stores, country clubs, and home delivery.

“The daily structure and personal fulfillment of a job well done is an integral part of life — one that is just as essential for people with autism as it is for any other adult,” comments Lisa Goldstein, vice president of development for the foundation and sales director for Greens Do Good, New Jersey’s first vertical farm that grows produce for the greater good.

Goldstein was introduced to the REED foundation over ten years ago, when she assisted with a fall event. She started working at REED the very next day and hasn’t looked back since.

Continued on Page 12





“About one year later, there was another open position and I had the perfect candidate. I called my dear friend, Jen Faust, who has the same work ethic and passion as I do, and the rest is history,” explains Goldstein. “Friends helping friends. We have been working together ever since. It’s all about amazing people wanting to give back.”

Faust serves as the communications director for the foundation and operations director for Greens Do Good.

The work of Goldstein, Faust and all the other dedicated colleagues and members of this unique organization certainly does not go unnoticed. No matter how small it may seem, the impact is substantial for every person who walks through Reed’s doors.

“Each day brings new opportunities to positively impact the lives of children, adults, and their families,” adds Faust.

One special moment that summarizes this impact nicely recently occurred when a REED Academy graduate joined the Greens Do Good Workforce Development Program. This young adult soon discovered a love of farming and showed an aptitude for hydroponics. Deservingly, he was offered a paid position as farm technician.

“The value he contributed to our team doubled,” says Faust.

After months of hard work and continued learning, they happily gave him a much-deserved promotion to Assistant Coordinator for Workforce Development, at which point he returned home to his parents, brother, and sisters and proudly announced that he was the first in the family to ever receive a promotion.

“Creating opportunities to empower teens and young adults with autism, helping them realize a sense of pride for the value they contribute, is what we strive for every day.”

Clearly, what started as a simple idea has quickly turned into a life-changing endeavor and unparalleled success for countless Bergen County residents. With the generosity of the community, grants, and donations, the group continues to move the needle forward and is committed to providing people with autism the resources and help they need throughout their lifetime.

“The reward of helping individuals with autism, as well as their families and communities, keeps me moving forward,” comments Goldstein. “My position is constantly evolving and there are always new and exciting challenges with every added project.

“I am extremely proud of our work and what we have accomplished at REED and Greens Do Good. We are continuing to collaborate on new projects that will enhance the lives of those we serve.”

Up next, Reed Foundation for Autism is partnering with Concordia, an architecture, planning and community engagement company to co-design a truly inclusive residential community where members can live, work, thrive and defy all odds.

Interested in learning more and supporting REED Foundation for Autism? There are many ways to get involved, including an annual bike event that is open to the public for participation (this year’s event was held on June 5). Additionally, the “One Big Canvas” children book series seeks to share positive and engaging stories to promote acceptance, understanding and kindness for all. “The Masterpiece” and “Molding Clay” can be purchased on Amazon, with all proceeds supporting the REED Foundation’s family programs.



For more information or tours, visit www.reedfoundationforautism.org.

DAMAN ASSOCIATES INC.

FOR ALL OF YOUR INSURANCE NEEDS



Auto Insurance



Home Insurance



Business Insurance

The Convenience of Online Insurance with the Service of a Local Agency

We do the insurance shopping so you don't have to

www.damanassociates.com

Franklin Lakes Address:
851 Franklin Lake Rd, Suite 35,
Franklin Lakes, NJ 07417
P 201-891-3727 F 201-891-8008

Hamilton Address:
100 Horizon Center Blvd, Suite 215,
Hamilton, NJ 08690
P 609-528-5653

Cartersville Ga Address:
1124 N Tennessee St Suite 103
Cartersville, Ga 30120
P 770-544-9000