

# 1,000 served: Positive Vibe job program hits milestone in training those with special needs

By BRANDON SHULLEETA Richmond Times-Dispatch



Garth Larcen opened Max's Positive Vibe Café to work alongside his son, Max, who has muscular dystrophy.

Now, a decade later, the restaurant is also home to a food services training program for people with disabilities that just saw its 1,000th student graduate.

Positive Vibe, off Forest Hill Avenue in South Richmond, is the anchor of the Positive Vibe Foundation, which serves as a training ground for disabled people.

“It truly changes their lives,” owner Garth Larcen said of the four-week program. “The fact that we got to 1,000 is really surprising.”

Garth and Max Larcen had initially planned to hire a few people with disabilities to work at the restaurant before they came up with the idea for the training program. It has expanded over the years and includes students with physical, cognitive or developmental disabilities, and the restaurant continues to be run in part by people with disabilities. And, in recent years, some programs developed across the country have used it as a model, Garth Larcen said.

Initially, Larcen said, he figured they'd train perhaps five or 10 people per year. But the interest in the program was far greater than the father-son duo had expected. “There was a great need that nobody anticipated,” Larcen said. It didn't take long for him to discover that there are a lot of people with disabilities looking for their chance to work for a living.

Many of the participants in Positive Vibe's free program, which is one of a few in the United States, said program training director Nicole Reedy, are recent high school

graduates who have been referred by their local school systems. Many participants are 18 to 22 years old, but the ages, backgrounds and skill levels vary.

“If it wasn’t for this, I would have nothing ... as far as training,” said Dondre Tucker, 20, of Powhatan County.

Tucker said it’s been his dream since he was a child to be a chef and that the four-week training program plus an advanced program offered by the Positive Vibe Foundation has him better prepared to work in the industry.

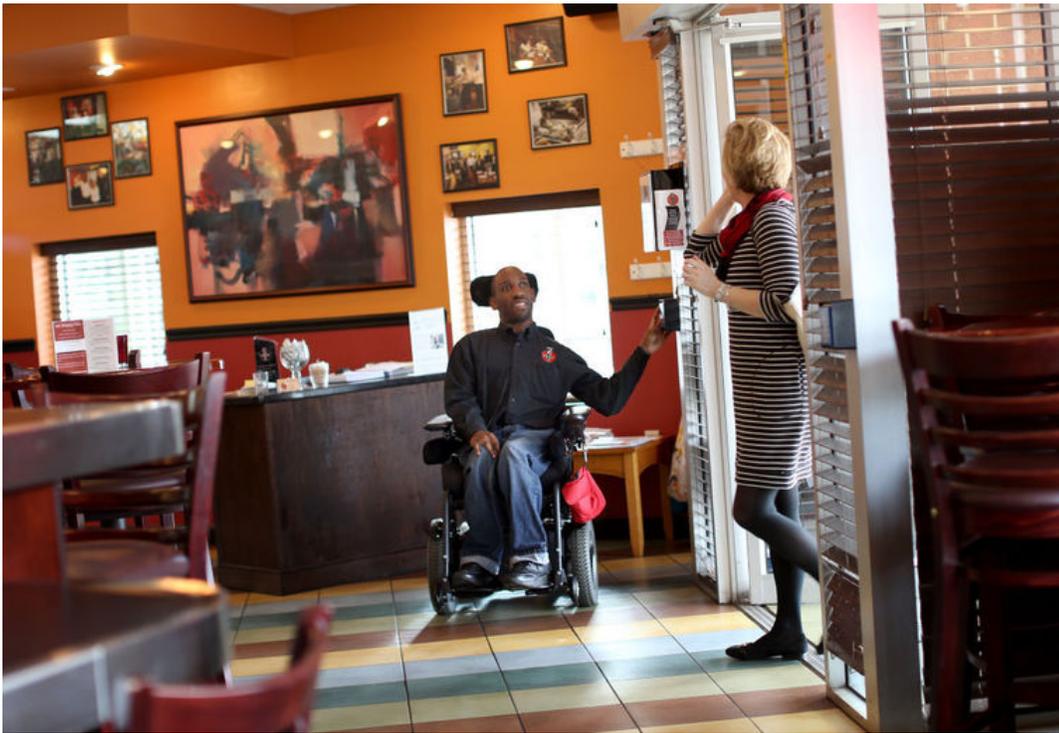


“It’s a big transformation,” Reedy said of students’ development compared with when they first enter the program, “and a lot of these kids have never had opportunities like this. They’ve never really had an opportunity to work or have an internship where they’re able to see themselves grow and learn these different skills. So when they (have that opportunity), they just come alive.”

Reedy added that many of their graduates go on to get jobs, but even those who don’t find work benefit in other facets of their lives.

She tries to instill in students that their disabilities should not define them or keep them from reaching their goals.

“That’s a part of their lives, but that’s not who they are,” Reedy said.



“Yes, they may have autism,” Reedy said, picking an example, “but they are so much more, and they have so much more to offer the world. So once you build their confidence and you build their

self-worth, when they go to an interview, the employer will hopefully see their abilities and what they can do and not what they can’t do.”

Working makes many people feel independent and confident, Reedy said. She mentioned one student who was so shy that he barely talked when he first entered the program, but he gradually became outgoing and gained friends along the way.

To be accepted into the program, prospective students must have a certain ability level and show a desire to be part of the program. Graduates receive certifications attesting to their various abilities, whether hosting, cooking, washing dishes or cleaning, for example.

The foundation is funded through donations and fundraising events. However, Larcen said people can also show their support simply by going to the restaurant for food or drinks. Larcen said it is a challenge to bring in enough money to keep the training program going, but he plans to continue it as long as he can.

Rachel Danielsen, a 20-year-old recent graduate of the Positive Vibe program and a Richmond resident, said she used to have a knife phobia, but her fear of sharp objects subsided during training as she worked with knives to help prepare meals.

“This has always been my dream job, and I wanted to be trained in this class, because I want to see myself being able to be more independent in the future,” Danielsen said.

“This has been a very wonderful experience, and I hope to be in the newspaper again. ... I want to try to do new things in my life.”

