



A father's vision for helping his son with DMD deal with depression has grown into a popular restaurant and training ground for people with disabilities

by Richard Senti

“**E**mployment to someone with a disability is a privilege, not an obligation,” says Garth Larcen. “People with disabilities, they just want to be part of a team.” If anyone should know what he’s talking about, it’s Garth. He’s speaking from both knowledge and experience — as a father, an employer and as a job trainer.

Eight years ago, he and his son Max Larcen, who has **Duchenne muscular dystrophy**, opened a small but unique restaurant in a tree-lined neighborhood shopping center about a mile from the historic James River, and about 10 minutes from the state capitol in downtown Richmond, Va. Little did they realize at the time that they were creating an establishment that would affect so many people’s lives for the better.

Max’s Positive Vibe Café is not only a popular eatery serving high-quality meals at reasonable prices and offering live entertainment in the bargain, it’s also the training ground and employer for people with disabilities who are interested in careers in the restaurant industry; at last count, the training program has graduated more than 650 workers.

Garth will be the first to tell you their goals were not nearly so grand when this whole thing started. He says that at the time he was just a dad, trying like heck to come up with some sort of decent employment situation for his son, who was out of work and depressed. Max, now 35, had graduated from high school and had a couple of years of college under his belt.

“I was around 24, working as a ticket-taker in a movie theater for a while,” says Max. “Then I worked in a record store for a bit, but I knew this was not what I really wanted to do.”

He wanted to find a decent job, but was coming up short. The interview process, even for able-bodied job seekers is difficult enough. Factoring a wheelchair into that scenario multiplied the challenges. “Max wasn’t a real happy guy; in fact, he was getting pretty frustrated,” says his father. “He was tired of going out and being turned down all the time. He wasn’t to the point of giving up, but he was close. As a parent, you’re not going to sit back and watch that happen. We had to come up with something.”

The family “sat down and started talking about it; maybe there was something we could create that would offer him an occupation,” says Garth, who was making a decent living as an insurance agent at the time. Because he had owned and operated a restaurant in Blacksburg, Va., years earlier, “I thought that maybe a café was something we could do, and Max could have a role in it.”

From that germ of an idea, it wasn’t long before they were thinking bigger. Why not train and employ, in addition to Max, others with disabilities? Garth used his business experience to build this idea sensibly. He knew enough about the restaurant business to know it would be very difficult to create this enterprise as a traditional for-profit business. One of their first steps, then, was to form a nonprofit foundation which would own and fund the café. Max named the fund “GLMD” — Get Lost Muscular Dystrophy.

Because this “thing” they were trying to create had never been

done before in the restaurant industry, they found grant money a tough nut to crack. "Our idea was too radical," says Garth. In the beginning, they raised zero dollars chasing grants. So they turned to their neighbors, who liked the idea and were more than willing to help.

"Community involvement was the key," says Garth. "We had all sorts of people involved. A variety of construction people came in to help build different parts of the café like the dining areas and the bar; a local supermarket chain donated equipment for our kitchen; we had electricians, plumbers ... This all resulted in a true feeling of community participation — an ownership that comes from everybody pitchin' in."

Finally, in January 2005, the Larcens opened for business. It was a concept whose time had come. Supported by the community that built it, business was good at Max's Positive Vibe Café. And happily that "radical" idea attracted some attention from the national media. "Within the first two months, there was an article about us in the Wall Street Journal," Garth says. "It was just pure luck. And that attracted a CBS Morning News piece on us." It was this national publicity that helped their foundation become less radical in the eyes of grant sources.

Now, eight years and one expansion/renovation later, the Positive Vibe is an established member of the Richmond community. Open for lunch and dinner six days a week, the restaurant is, as you would expect, completely accessible, from automatic entry doors to bathrooms built for full-size power chairs.

"One of my earliest contributions to the project, back in the design phase, was making sure that people with disabilities would be able to come in to the café and comfortably enjoy a meal," says Max. "I made sure they could easily navigate the café. We could have crowded a lot more tables and chairs in the dining areas, but we decided early on to offer more open space, making it easier for a person, even in a large power chair, to move around." Though the original bar was intended to be wheelchair friendly, Max's power chair wouldn't fit under it (the contractors had used manual wheelchair measurements). So he insisted they rebuild it

One of the main missions of the Positive Vibe Café is to provide job training for people with either physical or cognitive disabilities. Trainees learn to perform hosting and cashier duties in the dining room (top photo) and food preparation in the kitchen (bottom photo). A guest chef (middle photo) demonstrates how to prepare food and cook from a wheelchair.



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to a higher profile.

The kitchen area is equally accessible. There's a special stainless steel work surface that can be adjusted to very specific heights to accommodate wheelchair workers. And there are low-riding, pull-out refrigeration drawers for food storage, which are much more accessible to wheelchair workers.

Max is the assistant manager of the operation, responsible for greeting and seating customers when they arrive, taking reservations, and directing the servers and bussers. "There was a lot I had to learn, but I've grown into the job over the years," he says. "I feel like I have a place in life now, a sense of purpose that I didn't have before the café."

As Max's DMD progresses, he occasionally needs to cut back on his duties. Fortunately, the staff he helps train can step in when needed.

The Larcens have been associated with MDA since Max was a child; in fact when he was 8, he was a goodwill ambassador in the Richmond area. Over the years, they have participated in numerous MDA fundraising activities, and they occasionally host muscular dystrophy support groups at the café. Max, who was the 2011 Virginia State MDA Personal Achievement Award recipient, also attends regularly the MDA Clinic at Virginia Commonwealth University Medical Center in Richmond.

During mealtimes at Max's Café, there is indeed a *positive vibe* in the bustling eatery. Of the 25 paid employees, usually around 15 are people with physical or cognitive disabilities. Equally important to the mix are the volunteer servers who work only for tips. "They come from varied backgrounds," says Garth. "Some are housewives, or parents of people with disabilities, who come in and work a shift or two. Occasionally, they'll just donate the tips right back to us. Some are college kids who just love what we're doing; they might keep the tips for spending money."

Also part of the paid staff are the executive chef and his assistants. The menu,



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The Positive Vibe Café's kitchen area features low-riding, pull-out refrigeration drawers and adjustable stainless steel work surfaces for individuals working in wheelchairs.

which changes often, is wide-ranging and eclectic. They call it homemade comfort food — "guilt-free food at guilt-free prices." Here's a sampling from their menu, as of this writing: For lunch you might want to try the grilled buffalo meatloaf with your choice of spicy creole sauce or traditional gravy (comfort fans: go gravy). For dinner, there's cornmeal-breaded Southern fried catfish with lemon tabasco rémoulade. There are also sides of Vidalia onion collard greens, smoked Gouda mac and cheese, and fried cinnamon apples.

Garth says they've also received tremendous support from local chefs around the community. Almost every month, he says, the Positive Vibe will have a Guest Chef Night: "One of the local chefs from a restaurant or country club in the area will come in for the evening with a special entrée and they'll prepare a featured dinner. Sometimes they'll even provide the ingredients so we can realize a little more profit."

In addition to serving scrumptious lunches and dinners for the people of Richmond, Max's Positive Vibe Café, true to its mission statement, is dedicated to providing job training for people with either physical or cognitive disabilities. Trainees learn basic, entry-level food-service skills, such as kitchen prep, bussing tables and operating a commercial dishwasher. But

they also receive practical instruction on how to find and apply for jobs in the food services industry.

"Probably the most important thing we teach our trainees is self-confidence," says Garth. "They gain an enormous amount during this time. Most of the folks who go through our classes have never been recognized for having any real skills at all." By the time the trainees are ready for graduation, not only do they have a skill set, they also have the confidence to use it.

On any given evening, if you happen into the Positive Vibe Café in Richmond, you'll most likely be greeted by Max himself, who'll inform you of the chef's specials. Not too far away, you'll find Garth, no doubt working on the next fundraising event. And scattered throughout the Richmond area at any number of food-service venues, will be many Positive Vibe grads, happily doing jobs they never believed they'd be able to do. □

Max's Positive Vibe Café is located at 2825 Hathaway Road, Richmond, VA 23225. For more information on the restaurant — such as the current menu or upcoming events — visit its website at positivevibecafe.com.