

Employer is baking the world a better place

By Chicago Tribune, adapted by Newsela staff on 01.26.15



During a break at work, Drew McDonough reaches among his colleagues to grab a piece of freshly baked chocolate chip banana bread. McDonough, who is autistic, got hired when bakery owner Jean Kroll decided to give him and two other autistic adults a short-term job. That eventually led to the development of a program that helps people with autism learn the skills necessary to get and keep a job.

Nancy Stone/Chicago Tribune/TNS

EVANSTON, Ill. — Drew McDonough walks quickly past the 50-pound bags of brown sugar and the huge tubs of chocolate frosting. He dresses in his bakery clothes, then speed-walks toward the table where he packages cups of sticky toffee pudding.

When his boss inquires about his weekend, McDonough responds with brisk one-word answers and barely makes eye contact. But that is fine with Jean Kroll, owner of the Sugar & Spice Extraordinary Sweet Treats bakery in the Chicago suburb of Evanston. She simply points her new hire toward the racks of golden brown cakes.

“We have 800,” she says. “Can you start by dating the sleeves and then getting some boxes?”

For the rest of the shift on this cold December afternoon, the quiet, dark-haired 27-year-old moves so quickly he seems set on fast-forward. He boxes cakes, stacks them on a hand cart and labels them for shipment. When he’s done, he carefully sweeps the floor.

For Small Businesses, Jobs Aren't Charity

McDonough has autism, a disability in which people can have trouble with social skills and communication. The fact that he also has a job at the bakery is something that he says is “probably a miracle.”

“I’m working 20 hours a week, which my parents are very happy about,” he said. “It feels as happy as can be.”

This past summer, McDonough and two other men with autism arrived at the bakery as part of a six-week unpaid internship. But as the men learned to measure sugar and package cakes, a graduate student from the nearby Northwestern University’s business school carefully tracked how productive they were. The question: Did it make good business sense to hire someone with a disability?

For Kroll, who had poured her life savings into the bakery, that was a critical question. “Small businesses hire based on economics,” Kroll said. Most of them are not big enough to hire out of a sense of charity.

Be Nice, And Be Smart

The story of how she offered paid positions to McDonough and two other men with autism is one of luck and goodwill. But it is also, according to Kroll, the story of a clear-eyed business decision.

“People always say, ‘That’s such a nice thing to do,’” said Kroll, referring to her decision to hire the men. “I say, ‘Yes it is nice, but it’s also a smart thing to do.’” Two years ago, Kroll moved her bakery near a nonprofit called Have Dreams. The organization provides services to people with autism. Shortly after the move, Kroll’s landlord mentioned that her new neighbors — the men and women with autism — were always looking for job training.

Kroll invited five men with autism to help her construct and label boxes for her chocolate chip, oatmeal raisin and shortbread cookies. For a year and a half, the men came every week. There was a tall, blond-haired man named Zach, who loved to talk and ask questions. There was Michael, who was playful and cracked jokes, and Jimmy, who was so focused that he could label boxes as fast as any worker.

“They came every week and were smiling and enthusiastic,” Kroll recalled. “My staff really warmed to them too.”

A No, Then A Reconsideration

One day, an administrator at Have Dreams asked if Kroll might have other jobs for the men. Kroll’s answer was a firm and immediate “No.” After she went home that night, she couldn’t stop thinking about what she had said. She was angry at herself, and so Kroll and a team from Have Dreams came up with a plan to begin a job training program at the bakery. They eventually received a \$125,000 grant from the Chicago-based Coleman Foundation, which required Have Dreams to hire a business student to collect data on the men’s productivity. If the bakery program succeeded, the data could be used to persuade other businesses to hire people with disabilities.

On June 24, three men arrived at the bakery, and slowly grew more comfortable with the work. By the end of the six weeks, the men showed that they could work about 80 percent as quickly as a typical bakery worker. For Kroll, that was the point where she could start offering them jobs. Now, McDonough spends his days amid kettles simmering with 40-gallon batches of buttery toffee sauce. Having a job, he said, “feels fabulous.”

Employee Helps The Business Grow

As McDonough’s shift comes to an end on that recent December day, he carefully sticks toffee-colored labels on 67 boxes of cakes. He grabs a broom and sweeps the bits of shortbread and the sprinkling of cocoa powder that had fallen on the bakery floor.

Afterward, Kroll stands in the bakery, an apron around her waist and a pile of orders for baked goods in her hand. “It was a great day. A really nice, regular day,” she said. McDonough had worked independently, taken ownership of his task and cleaned up afterward. What’s more, she said, he has helped her business grow. As he develops more skills, she said, he’ll earn wage increases, “just like everyone else.”

“This is a good business decision,” she said. “It just so happens that it’s also a really good social decision and a good moral decision too.”