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The power of a job to transform a life: Inclusive hiring is an idea whose time has come

WEEKEND READ | *Three new innovative projects are leading the way.*

Susan Schwartz • Montreal Gazette

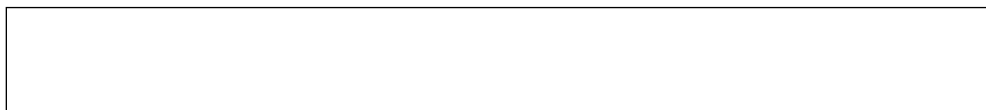
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Zera Café employee Daniel Lach, left, works with job coach Caroline Mosel, preparing cabbage rolls. "This is great job training," Mosel says. PHOTO BY DAVE SIDAWAY /Montreal Gazette

Diego Noya's tasks as a physio helper at Physio Verdun include laundering towels and pillowcases and disinfecting the rooms used by the physiotherapists. The tasks keep him busy and he enjoys doing them.

He also enjoys seeing his colleagues and friends at work: It feels really good that they treat one another with respect, he said, and that his colleagues are always available to teach him new things.



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What he likes most is that he feels included — “and the reason I feel included is because they accept me the way I am.”

Noya, 28, has autism.

He wants what we all want: to feel valued and validated. To be a part of something. To have a sense of purpose. Many of us find that through work. But having disabilities — or differing abilities, as they are also called — often means being undervalued by a society that looks at us and sees only what we *can't* do.

For Sam Benamron, who employs four young adults with differing abilities as physio helpers in his Montreal physiotherapy and occupational therapy clinics, inclusive hiring is an idea whose time has come.

“My goal is to try to get companies to do what I do,” he said. “We want to be able to spread the message of becoming a society that is a little more thoughtful and inclusive.”

Three new local initiatives are a hopeful sign that Benamron is right: two social enterprises creating employment opportunities for young people with differing abilities — a catering company and a bakery — and an ambitious industry-focused educational program involving one of Canada’s largest private-sector employers.



A mini-market in a corner of the cafeteria at the Wagar Adult Education Centre was installed by Maxi employees who volunteered their time assembling shelves and stocking them. Equipment includes a conveyor belt, cash register, supermarket carts and “jiggers” to move around pallets. PHOTO BY DAVE SIDAWAY /Montreal Gazette

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Steps, a school for students with autism spectrum disorders: Students at schools like Giant Steps age out of the system at 21.

“Our program is really positioning the employee as an equal,” said Andre Pereira, project manager for employment initiatives at Giant Steps and manager of Polaris Enterprise.

It’s a pilot project, its objective to find employment for participants in retail or distribution-centre environments, Pereira said — at the same time raising awareness of how hiring people with differing abilities can have a positive effect on a company’s bottom line: Benefits include lower absenteeism, less turnover and equal or greater productivity.

The program, which started last August with 10 participants, has as partners the [Wagar Adult Education Centre](#) of the English Montreal School Board (EMSB), the [Transforming Autism Care Consortium](#) research network; [Loblaws](#) Companies Ltd., which counts Provigo and Maxi stores under its banner in Quebec; and the Public Health Agency of Canada’s Autism Spectrum Disorder Strategic Fund.

Participants spend time in a classroom at the Wagar centre, meeting daily with an EMSB teacher and two job coaches from Giant Steps. A mini-market in a corner of the Côte-St-Luc centre’s cafeteria for hands-on training was installed by Maxi employees who volunteered their time assembling shelves and stocking them, said Nick Katalifos, the centre’s principal. Equipment also includes a conveyor belt, cash register, supermarket carts and “jiggers” to move around pallets.

The program also involves work “stages,” or placements, at Provigo’s distribution centre in Laval and in Maxi and Provigo stores, with participants accompanied by their job coaches.

Participants “have their strengths and abilities but also challenges,” Pereira said. “In order for them to find and keep a job, we have to work on many elements, as a group and one-on-one, including self-determination, soft skills, self-esteem, identifying interests and strengths and making decisions.”

Georgia Kamateros, a teacher at the Wagar Adult Education Centre in Côte-St-Luc, offers hands-on training to Nicholas Colida, 26, at a mini-market installed in the cafeteria. “I like getting my job done,” Colida says. He hopes the program will lead to a job.
PHOTO BY DAVE SIDAWAY /Montreal Gazette

Abstract concepts can be difficult for participants to grasp and some communicate better than others, he said, and people on the autism spectrum like routine and often don’t do well with unexpected turns of events.

Participant Ismael Sarmiento-Hammoud, 28, loves the program’s activities. “I feel like I’m learning things,” he said. Once he completes the program, “I hope to have a job.”

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Other vocational programs within the EMSB and at other school boards are also designed to prepare participants for the workplace. “Our goal is to help these adults get out there and build on their own independence, self-identity and ultimately to find fulfilling work,” said Wagar principal Katalifos, who is also president of the board at Giant Steps, where his son is a student.

“As a parent I am thinking about my own son,” he said. “When you look at autism alone, there is an 85-per-cent unemployment rate. The shame is that all the research indicates not only that they are employable but that, with the right training, they can make exceptional employees. People have to be open and awareness has to be raised in terms of company culture. The research shows that when you hire people with any type of disability, the atmosphere in a company improves, as does the sense of team spirit — and, ultimately, it helps the bottom line.”



Zera Café employee Yasmine Mahrach, left, with volunteer job coach Joanie Spector, making an Israeli corn salad featuring cucumber, bell pepper, celery, corn and cilantro and a dressing featuring mayonaise, lemon juice, sumac and olive oil. PHOTO BY DAVE SIDAWAY /Montreal Gazette

ZERA CAFÉ

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that many spend their days at home, isolated, staring at the screens on their devices, going to bed late and sleeping in — and that some develop conditions like low self-esteem, depression or eating disorders.

The isolation many of us are feeling during the pandemic “is their reality all the time,” she said.

“As a parent myself to young adults, I can’t imagine how hard it is to have to continue to parent a young adult when, typically, this is the time to let go and let them launch.”

After years of working in IT, Rochman returned to university for a graduate diploma in management of health and social services. “I wanted a change — and I have always wanted to do something in the helping profession,” she said.

That something was starting Zera Café, a catering service that operates as a not-for-profit social enterprise whose mission is to integrate neurodiverse adults into the workplace and support them as they do meaningful work. The word zera is Hebrew for seed, or beginnings.

“We are trying to plant a seed to help these people flourish,” she said.

Zera Café was launched in the spring of 2020 with a \$25,000 grant from the Jewish Community Foundation and has grown, through word of mouth, as customers order dishes and meals online and volunteers deliver them twice weekly. Fare changes weekly and includes zaatar-cruste salmon with roasted carrots and couscous; harissa soup; sweet potato, lentil and feta salad; broccoli frittata with caramelized onion and cheddar; and signature chocolate brownies with halvah and tahini. About 45 orders are filled weekly and an average 120 items ordered. Many clients are returning customers.

There are six young adults on the payroll, each working up to 12 hours a week in a Montreal synagogue kitchen space. Kitchen supervisor and trainer Adad Ben-Elkana, who has worked in restaurant kitchens, said: “It’s nice to be working with people who want to learn and to give them basic skills that they will hopefully use in the job market. As a chef, I try to be very inclusive in the kitchen, teaching development of skills and nurturing talents.”

Zera Café employees are clients of Agence Ometz, a community organization that supports individuals and families through social, employment and other services. They are paid minimum wage — and a portion of their salary is subsidized by the federal government and Emploi-Québec. Caroline Mosel, a professional job coach hired by Ometz, works with the employees, as do volunteer job coaches. “This is great job training,” Mosel said.

Zera Café is a labour of love for Rochman, a seven-day-a-week commitment that has her juggling everything from buying groceries to working on recipes and helping with deliveries.

She has never worked harder — but that Zera exists means “the employees have structure and purpose in their lives — and I am told this helps tremendously with their mental health and prevents negative behaviours,” she said. “For the first time in their lives, our employees are on the giving rather than the receiving end of support. And it makes them feel great.”

Employee Yasmine Mahrach, 22, has been learning many skills in addition to basic cooking skills, she said; she now cooks for herself at home and hopes one day to work in a professional kitchen. “I am so proud,” she said.

Employee Daniel Lach, also 22, said, “I feel I have learned a lot.” His mother, Randi Karpman Lach, calls Zera “an incredible, incredible godsend to us. Daniel feels very independent,” she said. “He follows directions and he is a very diligent worker: His job coach says the same and so does Eve.”

Employees Rachel Fiter, Esther Ohayon and Ricki Malus love baking — Malus taught Rochman, over Zoom, how to make babka — and employee Conrad Corning, who has worked in restaurant kitchens, “is delighted to have lasted so long at a job,” Rochman said. “It is really helping his self-esteem.”

“Some of our employees have come a long way and can be left to do things unsupervised, so sometimes one job coach is looking in on two or three employees,” Rochman said. “I believe some will be able to leave us and work elsewhere, but it will take time. Others might get to the point of being very independent workers with us. We are still in early days but, as we grow, we will get a better understanding of how to optimize each individual’s independence.”

Grateful as she is to the Shaare Zion Congregation, which has been renting them the kitchen space, Rochman looks forward to a time when Zera Café has its own location.

At the DeLaMie bakery, from left: baker Philip Peris takes challahs hot out of the oven as job coach Caroline Mosel and baker Esther Ohayon look on. Photos at the bakery were taken in early 2020, pre-pandemic, hence the absence of masks. Photo courtesy Friendship Circle of Montreal.

DELAMIE BAKERY

Last September, Friendship Circle launched a culinary arts vocational training program in co-operation with the EMSB to help address limited employment opportunities for people with special needs. The program, with 11 participants, is one of about 20 initiatives the board has with local community organizations.

Friendship Circle also reached out to Jeffrey Finkelstein, owner of the popular St-Laurent Blvd. bakery [Hof Kelsten](#), to build a bakery in its space. In part it was to provide young adults with differing abilities

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Finkelstein signed on as executive chef and helped make the [DeLaMie](#) bakery a reality: He contributed his expertise to the design and construction of the bakery kitchen and also the recipes. Some are from Hof Kelsten; others were created especially for DeLaMie. He came up with the idea of a weekly subscription-based model for DeLaMie's challah, babka and savoury spreads, and trained head baker Julie Brownstein as his "boots on the ground" to supervise and mentor the eight employees at DeLaMie, which is sponsored in part by the RBC Foundation.

One goal for DeLaMie — the name draws on the French word for friend and the "mie," or crumb, of bread — is for participants in Friendship Circle's culinary arts training program to do paid workplace stages at DeLaMie, Willmott said. "Our mission has always been about bridging the gap between young adults with special needs and the broader community."

Bakers Dayna Wiseman, left, and Philip Peris spraying challahs with egg wash before they are baked at the DeLaMie bakery. Photo courtesy Friendship Circle of Montreal.

DeLaMie employees, like those at Zera Café, are clients of the Ometz agency. Ometz, through its Supported Employment Services (SES), funded by Emploi-Québec, helps a clientele of neurodiverse individuals such as those with an intellectual or learning disability, those with an autism spectrum disorder or a mental health diagnosis; it provides support for them throughout the job search process — including interview coaching and, frequently in non-pandemic times, accompaniment to job interviews.

The goal, explained SES manager Edina Markovitz, is to secure paid employment — whether in the competitive labour market, a social enterprise like Zera or DeLaMie, or an adapted enterprise such as the [JEM Workshop](#). "We want to foster a sense of independence, to set them up for success," she said. "And placing them in the right environment means they feel valued and thrive."

Said Finkelstein of the DeLaMie bakery: "The rationale of the project is that it is a social enterprise — it is not a charity — and that we are trying to make a difference in the lives of young adults and adults with special needs.

"A lot of the time, people with special needs are missing those connections, missing being taken seriously. I think we have some neglected people in our society, people who are being under-utilized. This is one way to try to change that."

ATA GLANCE:

Online orders from Zera Café can be made at [zera.cafe.ca](#). Learn more about the DeLaMie bakery at [delamie.ca](#). For now, there is a waiting list for DeLaMie subscriptions but spots are expected to open up soon. Prospective employers or job seekers wanting more information about Supported Employment Services at Ometz can contact Edina Markovitz at 514-342-0000, ext. 3377.

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“The way we run our business is like a family,” says Sam Benamron, left, owner of Physio Verdun and six other Montreal physiotherapy and occupational therapy clinics. Physio helper Diego Noya, right, has autism; he works alongside other employees, including physiotherapist Mathilde Montambault, seated. PHOTO BY ALLEN MCINNIS /Montreal Gazette

Physio clinics set the example, accepting employees ‘for who they are’

In five years, not one of the four young adults with differing abilities employed as physio helpers in Sam Benamron’s Montreal-area clinics has missed a day of work — unless he has specifically told them to stay home because of heavy snow or, more recently, the pandemic.

“They come here and they are happy. They love the team and love being part of something and they are also validated and respected. They are treated like all my employees.

“The way we run our business is like a family. It creates a really nice work environment — and means there is less staff turnover,” said Benamron, who owns seven physiotherapy and occupational therapy clinics in Montreal North, Verdun, Dorval and Côte-des-Neiges.

“Sam is the best boss I have ever had,” physio helper Diego Noya told the Montreal Gazette, echoing Benamron’s philosophy. “He treats me and everyone with respect.”

On Feb. 23, Benamron and Physio Verdun earned a “coup de cœur” mention for inclusive hiring from the jury in the annual À part entière competition organized by the Office des personnes handicapées du Québec.

VD - Prix À part entière 2020 - Physio Verdun - Coup de cœur du jury



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It's not that there haven't been obstacles. "Every day we learn to deal with those obstacles," Benamron said.

"We had to invest time in our employees, to find what their difficulties were and to try to eliminate them."

Benamron prefers the word neurodiverse to terms like "special needs" or "disabilities." The term has gained traction as conditions like autism have become more prevalent.

"The new way of thinking is to accept people for who they are. It's what schools are also teaching kids — that everybody is different," he said. "When you are more aware, you judge less."

There will always be "the ones who will never understand. With them, it is our job as inclusive establishments to show by example. People see them in action and say: 'Oh, I see.'"

"The reality is that if there were more autistic people, we would be the ones who were different," Benamron said.

"When you accept somebody for who they are, usually they excel."

Jeffrey Finkelstein, left, owner of the Hof Kelsten bakery and café, at the DeLaMie bakery with Dayna Wiseman, preparing chocolate babka. Photo courtesy Friendship Circle of Montreal.

Panel's message: Offer a job, expect way more in return

There is "a vast untapped pool of people" with differing abilities "who are dying to work — and they want to do a good job," Mark Cronin says in the award-winning 2019 short documentary *Sock Guys*. "You provide them with that opportunity and we are the winners."

Mark's youngest son, John, has Down syndrome. Since 2016, the duo has run John's Crazy Socks, a Long Island-based business that employs people with differing abilities. The documentary was screened recently for an audience of more than 250 in Montreal and Toronto at an online event featuring a panel discussion on social enterprises and inclusion.

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Montreal panelist Jeffrey Finkelstein, owner of Mile End bakery Hof Kelsten, is known for his community work — for saying yes whenever he is asked to participate in fundraisers. But when the Friendship Circle of Montreal approached him to build a bakery in its space, to provide employment opportunities for individuals with special needs, he was “petrified.”

“I have very little fear in business and life — but this challenge was outside my comfort zone,” he said at the Feb. 16 event, organized by five Montreal- and Toronto-based Jewish community organizations.

And yet “all our employees — they’re not scared: They are ready to work. Everyone who contacted me was so excited to try and get involved,” he said.

“If they’re not scared, how can I be scared?”

DeLaMie is a collaboration between Hof Kelsten and Friendship Circle that takes the form of a social enterprise: Social enterprises apply an entrepreneurial approach to creating community change.

“I can’t wait until somebody moves from DeLaMie to Hof Kelsten,” Finkelstein said. “I hope there is some synergy there: even cooler if they move to another job that we are not even involved with.”

Participant Nechama Dahan, whose daughter Bracha works at Montreal’s JEM Workshop, an adapted enterprise providing packaging services to industry, said of Bracha: “Every morning she has a place to go.

“She goes to a place where she feels that she belongs. She is glad to go — just like every adult with a job.”

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