

Pembroke business boosts jobs for disabled

By Jon Chesto

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John Burgess stocks the coolers, dutifully arranging the newly arrived soda and juice bottles in their respective shelves. Meanwhile, Dawn Grayton cheerfully opens the door to the ladies room, mop in hand. And then Chris Vittorini greets customers with a wide smile as he arrives to help clean the store.

This is a typical Thursday morning in the Mobil shop in Pembroke on the west side of Route 3. Except what's happening here is anything but typical: Burgess, Grayton and Vittorini all have developmental disabilities.

Finding jobs can be difficult for people with impairments such as severe autism or Down syndrome. But Verc Enterprises has kept an open door for many years. At some point in 2009, more than 10 percent of the company's work force had some form of developmental disability. By April of this year, that number was up to 15 percent.

You may not have heard of the Duxbury-based company, but you've probably bought snacks in one of its stores or refueled at one of its service stations. When Verc completes its acquisition of a Gulf gas station in Marlboro in a few weeks, it will have 23 locations spread throughout eastern Massachusetts and southern New Hampshire.

Leo Vercollone, CEO and co-owner of the chain, is proud to have grown the number to 23 with his brother Paul. The company has come a long way from the 1970s when it was a single car wash owned by their father.

But Vercollone is equally proud of another number: Individuals with developmental disabilities are working in at least 21 of these 23 stores. Of Verc's 180 or so employees, 32 have developmental impairments – or more than 17 percent of the total work force.

Verc fully pays for their wages and worker's compensation insurance. Vercollone says the firm doesn't get any subsidies from the government or a nonprofit group to do this, other than for the job coaches who accompany some of the workers.

While the company has always hired some people with developmental disabilities, Vercollone says Verc managers started making a conscious effort to reach out to community groups to build their work force about five years ago. The momentum has grown since that time through positive word-of-mouth and Verc's own expansion efforts into new communities.

For example, the Massachusetts chapter of Best Buddies started working with Verc about two years ago, according to Best Buddies chapter director Craig Welton. At the time, a Best Buddies board member in Duxbury made the introduction because he knew the Vercollone family and what they were trying to accomplish. Verc now employs four participants out of the 44 in the Best Buddies chapter's jobs program, more than any other business.

The Minute Man Arc in Concord first connected with Verc as customers: Minute Man Arc clients would stop at a Verc-owned Mobil store in Acton on the way home from

cleaning horse barns there. Executive director Marty Martini says his organization eventually learned about Verc's corporate mission through these pit stops.

So Minute Man Arc clients began to work for Verc last September. Since that time, four individuals associated with the nonprofit group have landed jobs in Verc stores. Martini says he can't think of another private-sector employer with such a commitment to hiring people with developmental disabilities.

That sentiment is echoed by the staff at The Arc of Massachusetts. Joshua Komyerov, the statewide group's director of government affairs, says what Verc is doing is practically unheard of among for-profit companies. His organization, a coalition of local service organizations such as the Minute Man Arc, is considering honoring Verc this year with one of its "Distinguished Citizens" awards. He says an awards committee is scheduled to meet on Tuesday to sort through the nominations and pick winners.

Vercollone says it's important for the company to take a leadership role in a community service. The outreach provides a sense of camaraderie and dignity to individuals who might otherwise have a hard time finding a job.

Vercollone says the strategy isn't solely altruistic. By being more inclusive with workers who have developmental disabilities, he says the approach fosters a caring culture in each store. That, in turn, encourages customers to return and employees to stay.



It's certainly not surprising that Verc is up for a statewide award. But Vercollone probably isn't worrying about that right now.

After all, Vercollone has a new goal in mind: He wants to reach 20 percent sometime next year, and he's already thinking about ways he can pull it off.