ROSIES employees have ‘diverse abilities’ and are ready to work
by Evan Henenson
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ROSIES Foundation founder Lee Chernotsky. Photos by Paul Tahzaman

Bags of potato chips have been hung on hooks, sodas are on ice, the tip jar is at the ready. Customer satisfaction surveys are in place, and there's a beanbag-toss game on the sidewalk — an added touch designed to get patrons to linger and get acquainted.

It's Wednesday morning, and — hot diggity dog! — the employees at the Removing Obstacles, Supporting Innovation, Empowerment and Sustainability (ROSIES) Foundation can hardly wait for the lunch rush at their hot dog stand on Washington Boulevard in the heart of the Culver City arts district.

The employees, who range in age from 20 to 36, have a range of developmental disabilities including autism spectrum disorders and Down syndrome. As far as ROSIES is concerned, however, they have “diverse abilities,” not disabilities, and they are trained, enthusiastic and ready to work.

The day's job responsibilities have been clearly defined, although many of the 12 ROSIES employees can alternate shifts. Brett Viker and Naayin Akympon team up to work the food. William Sachs is the greeter, taking orders and handling cash and credit cards. Joey Schwartzman, the team’s all-purpose fix-it man, oversees the overall cart management and assists customers with surveys.
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known as Bubba Rose, who continuously reminded young Lee that his attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) should be viewed as a strength rather than an impediment.

“I’ve always found it very empowering to be in a mentoring position,” Chernotsky said. “Growing up with ADHD and finally coming to terms with (the realization that), ‘All right, I can’t do everything myself. I need to ask for help sometimes,’ was very humbling. These are the cards that [we have] been dealt and we’re trying to figure out how to play poker with them the best way we can.”

Last year was ROSIES’ first year of operation, and it focused largely on fundraising and training, setting up an intensive, eight-month program to provide vocational training and work readiness skills for its enlistees. The nonprofit graduated two classes of its Collaborative, Respected, Empowered Workers (CREW) college. Now, with social enterprise initiatives such as the food ventures ramping up, Chernotsky said the foundation’s emphasis has shifted to providing employees paid, on-the-job experience.

“We’re giving people a job opportunity with what we call a reasonable learning curve,” Chernotsky said. “The idea was if we give people work and they try it out for 30 to 90 days like any other job, we really kind of level the playing field.”

Longtime friends, local businesses and community members have jumped in to help ROSIES find its footing. They’ve donated supplies, office space, professional expertise and, at times, an extra hand.

Jeff Rohatiner, owner of Jeff’s Gourmet Sausage Factory, is leasing the hot dog cart to ROSIES for $1 per month. Gerard Jiron, purchasing manager at the New School of Cooking, met weekly with ROSIES employees, giving them jobs around the school and helping them prepare for their ServSafe food-handling certification tests. Neighboring businesses on Washington Boulevard have helped with advice on graphics and providing meeting space. ROSIES received key funding from its founding board chairman, Silicon Valley philanthropist Jeffrey Sobrato.

At the March soft launch of the hot dog cart, many of these friends dropped in to grab a wiener, toss a beanbag and share the good will. Whether arranging blooms for Valentine’s Day or gathering for karaoke, ROSIES events tend to inspire community building, said Vee Ravana, who operates the Studio by Dark artisanal gallery next door to the nonprofit.
employees, "They're so warm and welcoming. They're family, basically."

Especially enthusiastic is Sachs, who runs down the price list ($4 for a hot dog, $6 for a combo including chips and a drink) while informing customers that condiments and surveys can be found nearby. Of all the jobs on the cart, Sachs considers himself a natural fit for the greeter position because he socializes well with customers. Sachs said he hopes someday to work in movies or with children.

"I'm working on backup plans," Sachs said. "I like to write, so I'd like to hopefully be a writer or have some kind of creative job. Hopefully I can pursue my dreams and do some kind of career goal."

When lunch came to an end, the employees brought all the supplies indoors and convened at the ROSIES conference table to debrief, review the customer satisfaction surveys, and consider which part of the work day went well and what could be improved in the future.

Sachs felt as if he developed a strong rhythm with customers as the shift progressed. Michel enjoyed the beanbag toss, but decided he might be willing to take a turn on the cart next time. Viker worried that, while simultaneously cooking and handling food, he took on too many greeter duties.

"I might come off as too much of an attention grabber," he said. "I am the kind of guy who likes recognition and power. It's a line I have to walk."

Chernotsky noted that Viker and Akyempon were splendidly in sync handling the hot dog orders.

"I feel like we knocked that one out of the park," Viker agreed.

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