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The Uniquely Abled Academy at College of the Canyons is looking to offer college students on the autism spectrum a chance to learn job skills, work placement and new opportunities. (Photo by Thresa K. Richardson)

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Uniquely Abled Academy At COC Looks To Pilot Opportunities For Those On Autism Spectrum

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The Uniquely Abled Academy at College of the Canyons is looking to offer college students on the autism spectrum a chance to learn job skills, work placement and new opportunities.

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Ivan Rosenberg, who founded the program and is now bringing UAA to COC, said the program offers a solution to a traditional concern for many parents with children on the spectrum.

"I hope I live one day longer than my kid," said Ivan Rosenberg, sharing a poignant but troubling sentiment he felt summed up the fears of many special needs parents, "because I don't know how they're going to be taken care of when I'm gone."

Rosenberg was quick to point out that in no way was he trying to say children like his two, who are on the autism spectrum, couldn't thrive and excel in certain environments. He knows they're able to with the right coaching and mentorship.

However, traditional and outdated attitudes have created barriers for success in the past. And that's part of the unique shift he's trying to pilot at several community colleges, including College of the Canyons, with the Uniquely Abled Academy.

For one, there are very few vocational programs aimed at helping this population, which includes more than 3.5 million Americans, he said.

In order to help this population maximize its potential in the business community, Rosenberg looked to create a business paradigm — "It's not a charity model," he mentioned several times — that takes a holistic approach to coaching, training and job preparation for individuals on the autism spectrum.

There are three basic tenets, Rosenberg said: Get rid of the term "disabled" because it discourages hiring and doesn't take into account the fact that many on the autism spectrum have unique talents and abilities that qualify them for positions, sometimes better than those who are not on the autism spectrum; create vocational opportunities for these individuals, by finding where those unique qualifications and skills match up best in the workforce; and run the program on a business, as opposed to nonprofit, model.

After an initial successful pilot run of UAA at Glendale Community College, Rosenberg worked with COC's Michael Bastine, who runs the college's Center for Applied Competitive Technologies, as well as several others who hire in CNC machining, which is one of the first areas identified as an appropriate fit, and those who work with the autism spectrum population.

By treating the program as a business model, while working with nonprofits, business owners have quickly understood the value the program provides, Rosenberg said.

"We're providing the facilities and instruction, and hopefully, COC has 'the glue,'" Bastine said, to bring all the providers and employers to the table. The program is coming to COC with support from

several of the college's programs, as well as at least 18 service providers, employers and partners who want to see the program succeed.

For those interested, the program is going to have an open forum in October at the college's Performing Arts Center. The goal for administrators is to have the program up and running at COC in spring 2018, officials confirmed.

The next team meeting is set for September 27, from 8:30-10:30 a.m. at COC's University Center in Room 222. If anyone would like to become involved in the program, more information will be available there.

Anyone who would like more information about the program can contact Rosenberg at ivan@ivanrosenberg.com.

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ABOUT PERRY SMITH



Perry Smith is a print and broadcast journalist who has won several awards for his focused, hyperlocal community coverage in several different regions of the country. In addition to five years of experience covering the Santa Clarita Valley, Smith, a San Fernando Valley native, has worked in newspapers and news websites in Los Angeles, the Northwest, the Central Valley and the South, before coming to KHTS in 2012. To contact Smith, email him at Perry@hometownstation.com.



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