

# Positive returns

From persons with disabilities to youth at risk, entrepreneurship works for everyone

By Katie Ingram

Eleven-year-old Tolulope Boboye and 53-year-old Debbie Adams have one thing in common: they are defying public perception and reaping the social benefits of entrepreneurship.

Adams has Retinitis Pigmentosa, a disease that caused her to lose her peripheral vision. Even though she is considered disabled and legally blind, she owns her own business, PeopleCan Training and Development. PeopleCan offers support and training for new entrepreneurs.

"I would describe myself as a reluctant entrepreneur because it's not anything I wanted to happen," says Adams. "When I first started (looking for work), I gladly would have said yes to anything that came along, but eventually that tipped because I started to fall in love with the idea of being self-employed."

Tolulope is a member of Hope Blooms, a Halifax-based organization. It helps at-risk youth become entrepreneurs by having them manage and run a salad dressing business that uses vegetables they grow themselves.

"I decided to join because it's a really fun experience," says Tolulope, who has been with Hope Blooms for about eight years. "Most kids in my school aren't doing something like I'm doing now."

As for Adams, she used to work as a mechanic in the military. After becoming visually impaired she says she couldn't do things that other people could (such as driving) and she also developed depression and anxiety. All of this made it difficult for her to find work. Entrepreneurship, however, has helped improve her mental wellbeing and she now feels like she is an "essential" part of society.

"What entrepreneurship has done is that it has allowed my desire 'to serve' be filled again," she says. "I have a purpose."

But, as Adams experienced, the barriers for workers with disabilities are very real. This is where certain organizations, like the Entrepreneurs with Disabilities Network (EDN) and Ready, Willing and Able (RWA) come in. The EDN



Hope Blooms is a youth-run social enterprise in North End Halifax, growing healthy food for a healthy community. Photo provided by Hope Blooms

helps persons with disabilities in Nova Scotia grow and build their business or business idea, while RWA is a national program, with branches in Atlantic Canada, that focuses on entrepreneurs with intellectual disabilities or autism.

Jon Lister is the director of Labour Market Facilitation with the New Brunswick Association for Community Living, the organization that facilitates RWA in that province.

"It allows someone who might not fit into a nine-to-five work environment, or even shift work, to use their skills and interests to achieve economic independence and to pursue meaningful work," says Lister about the RWA program. "We bring a network of support around an individual, so they have everything they need in order to be successful."

Lister adds that only 25 per cent of people with autism or an intellectual disability are employed. With extra help, he says, these people are more socially involved in their community so they aren't a

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Debbie Adams, founder, PeopleCan



statistic.

"I think this can be a game changer and really change the employment landscape for persons with disabilities, especially around public perception," he says. "There are a lot of assumptions about people's abilities when they have a disability; this is a tool that people can access to overcome some of those assumptions."

Brian Aird, executive director of the EDN, has a similar sentiment. He says that if those with disabilities are supported in their business endeavours, the social benefits are endless.

"It helps with self-esteem and networking," he says. "Some people with disabilities live in poverty, so they don't live in an area where people are making a lot of money,

like lawyers, doctors or other professionals, but ... by becoming self-employed they are developing a bit of a network, or family, they might not have otherwise had."

Making new and fostering old personal connections is also something that attracted Tolulope and other children to Hope Blooms. "No matter where you are or what's going on with your situation, you can come here and let go of that bad situation," says Tolulope. "It's a safe place."

Fellow Hope Blooms member, Bocar Wade, 17, agrees. "It's like a family here," he says. "There is a lot of collaboration; we work as a team and learn a lot about each other as we all have different backgrounds."

Bocar has been with Hope Blooms for six years and likes how involved

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Iain Downey is the proud owner of Iain's Incredible Edibles — a Nova Scotia bakery with a flair for gluten and dairy-free goodies. He also has a high functioning form of Autism Spectrum Disorder. Photo provided by Ready, Willing and Able.

the group is in the community. They not only make and sell the salad dressings, but grow food for other events they host, like Soups for Seniors and community suppers.

"It feels really good to impact your community in a unique way (as) food security is a big problem in Halifax," he says. "What we do is on a micro-level, but it has a huge

impact on people because there are not a lot of grocery stores around here."

Sheldon Pollett is the executive director of Choices for Youth in Newfoundland. He says that many people are extremely supportive of at-risk youth and try to help, but there are those who refuse to look beyond a stereotype.

"What it comes down to is a lack of awareness because what people see are young people sometimes making bad decisions, that have consequences for other people in the community, like crime or other things related to safety," says Pollett. "That then causes a lot of judgement and reaction."

While Choices for Youth doesn't offer a specific entrepreneur program, they do have a "social enterprise" program called Impact Construction. Impact Construction employs at-risk or homeless youth to build affordable housing units and other buildings.

"We are not doing this for profit; we are not doing it just for the work, so why are we running a social enterprise company?" says Pollett. "There's only one reason; it's good for young people."

While there are number of social aspects related to business for both at-risk youth and those with disabilities, there is one other thing that stands out to Tolulope: it's something that anyone can do. "If kids are wondering what they can do, and all they are doing is sitting on a couch, they can come here; they can work and experience different and new things," she says about Hope Blooms. "It's something more people can definitely do."

Adams says that people should never think they can't do something just because of their situation.

"At 44, I was living on disability making \$15,000 a year, and now I own my business." •

#### FEEDBACK

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