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## **Tsunami of Young Adults with Autism Face Uncertain Future, Unemployment Crisis**

### ***Parents-Turned-Entrepreneurs, Autism Specialists Call for Small Business Solutions***

CHAPEL HILL, NC (FEBRUARY 10, 2014) – With mounting evidence that America is ill-prepared to serve the tsunami of young adults with autism aging out of school programs, parents-turned-entrepreneurs and autism leaders called for a national movement to create sustainable business ventures that will employ 500,000 adults with autism expected to seek employment over the next decade.

Meeting January 27-29 at a summit convened by [Extraordinary Ventures, Inc. \(EV\)](http://ExtraordinaryVentures.com), a North Carolina non-profit organization that is a pioneer in creating small businesses that employ adults across the autism spectrum, the leaders of EV and 14 other model programs mapped a pathway for applying their lessons learned in communities across the country. The summit – *Employing Adults on the Autism Spectrum: A Conference on Pioneering Small Business Models* – was especially timely now that 90 percent of people with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) are either unemployed or underemployed. And with the rate of autism up more than 300 percent since 2002, the crisis is just beginning.

“We are already at a crisis point, and this is just the start of the wave,” said Laura Klinger, Director of the TEACCH Program at the University of North Carolina. “As growing numbers of children with autism grow up over the next six years there will be a 78 percent increase in demand for adult services. These individuals often have strengths that make them good employees, but they face challenges in the workplace and need support.”

While little research has been done on the impact of employment and what approaches work, the more than 150 autism specialists and business leaders attending the summit agreed that small businesses and entrepreneurs can meet the needs of their communities while providing a range of jobs that match the skills of people with autism. Applying the lessons learned from 15 model programs across the country – from a kettle corn maker to a sophisticated software developer – the attendees identified the essentials for creating sustainable small business solutions to the autism employment gap. These “must have’s” include: taking a business approach to developing quality products and services, empowering parents, building partnerships in the community and identifying skills in people across the spectrum. The 15 models were identified through a 2012 study conducted by Autism Speaks.

“For the autism community, confronting the unemployment crisis now affecting tens of thousands of adults with autism and realizing their potential as truly successful and contributing members of society is mission critical,” said Lori Ireland, mother of a 23-year old son with autism who co-founded Extraordinary Ventures in 2007 with other parents in the Chapel Hill area. “Especially now when government budgets are tight, the answer is creating new self-sustaining businesses that will provide meaningful jobs for people with ASD and other developmental disabilities at the grassroots level.”

### **Business, Not Charity**

Involving a range of business solutions – from a bookstore, and car washing operation to a film production studio, web services company and local bakeries – the 15 models are operated by a mix of

non-profits, for-profits and benefit corporations. But regardless of the organizational structure, what makes these small businesses successful is providing a quality product or service.

“We quickly found out that to be viable, we had to lead with the value of the product or service first,” said Van Hatchell, Managing Director of Extraordinary Ventures, which runs five successful business ventures employing 40 adults with ASD and developmental disabilities. “You need to be sure there’s a market for what you’re selling, and that you can compete on price and quality.”

After trying and failing to develop more than a few temporary jobs through a traditional non-profit approach, EV assembled a team of recent college graduates – entrepreneurs interested in creating micro-businesses – and transformed a struggling start-up into five effective business ventures. These include a thriving laundry service for students attending the University of North Carolina, a transit bus cleaning operation, a conference and meeting center, scented candle making and office solutions service.

Reinforcing the importance of quality, Dave Friedman, a Chicago advertising executive and parent of an adult with autism, explained the underlying principle behind AutonomyWorks, the marketing and web services company he founded in 2012 to employ people with ASD. “Our goal was to be as good as a company with neuro-typical employees,” Friedman said. “Instead, we’re better.”

Today, a staff of 40 adults with autism at AutonomyWorks creates websites, provide quality assurance, analytics and database reporting. And they do the work more quickly, thoroughly and affordably than their competitors.

Another small business solution that emphasizes quality is the Stuttering King Bakery in Arizona, run by Matt Cottle, a 24-year-old man with autism, and his mother after Matt took a culinary class at the Southwest Autism Research & Resource Center in Phoenix (SARRC), and decided he wanted to be a baker. Started in the family’s home kitchen, the Stuttering King Bakery is named for King George VI who, much like Matt, found a way to achieve his goals despite the odds. Today, the bakery business is going so well that the Cottles are growing out of their home kitchen and will soon need to find a larger place.

“We didn’t want anyone to buy in sympathy,” said Peggy Cottle. “We wanted them to buy because Matt’s product is great.”

### **Powered by Parents**

Frustrated by long waiting lists for services and too few jobs, parents across the country are creating small businesses to provide jobs for their children and other adults with autism. Some, like Rising Tide Car Wash founder John D’Eri of Miami are seasoned entrepreneurs Others, like Ray and Janet Steffy of Kansas City who helped create Poppin’ Joe’s Gourmet Kettle Korn , are new entrepreneurs.

As a seasoned business leader living in Parkland, FL, D’Eri started Rising Tide Car Wash in 2012 to provide his 21-year-old son Andrew, who has autism, with a job. D’Eri said that certain traits associated with autism - like attention to detail – make a car wash a good fit for employing adults with ASD. Currently, Rising Tide employs 35 people with autism and has been ranked Broward County’s top car wash.

“I realized that if all I did was leave my son a trust fund, I had failed,” D’Eri said.

Even without a business background, Janet and Ray Steffy of Louisburg, KS made the decision to help their son, Joe, a young man with Down’s syndrome and ASD, start a business that Joe could manage

and operate. Together, the family created Poppin' Joe's Gourmet Kettle Korn in 2005, a local snack company that Joe now runs.

“You can sit on the couch and worry – which takes a lot of energy; or you can figure it out and just do it,” said Janet Steffy, who developed the business plan while Ray Steffy learned everything he could about how to make Kettle Korn.

Today Poppin' Joe's employs seven part-time employees. Joe has earned enough to purchase his own home, where he lives with an aide who helps with daily living skills.

### **Stigma Busting**

By creating partnerships with community stakeholders and giving adults with ASD new opportunities to work, the models highlighted at the summit are helping to change public perceptions of people with autism – an important step in opening more doors for these individuals. Because people with ASD often have difficulty with social interaction and communication and display repetitive behaviors, they are frequently misunderstood and sometimes feared.

One recent success story is the Beneficial Beans café in a Phoenix library, which only employs one person with autism yet has made a positive impact on community attitudes. Operated by the Southwestern Autism Research and Resource Center (SARRC), Beneficial Beans is part of a larger community-based effort to promote the abilities and talents of individuals with ASD through job training, an Entrepreneurial Center for Special Abilities, and community awareness programs.

“Forty thousand people a month walk past that café and see our barista,” said Jeri Kendle of SARRC, which operates the business. “There is evidence that we've done a lot to change attitudes, between the café and our other programs.”

Another model that is showcasing the work of adults with autism is Lee & Marie's Cakery in Miami, where founder Andrea Travaglia visits local high schools with employee Marc William to speak to students and distribute Marc's book, *Living Life with Autism: The World Through My Eyes*. The bakery employs 10 people with autism.

“We're not disabled, we're human beings and we have to take care of each other,” said Travaglia.

The 15 model programs featured at the *Employing Adults on the Autism Spectrum: A Conference on Pioneering Small Business Models* summit were: [Arthur & Friends](#) in Newton, NJ; [Aspiritech](#) in Chicago, IL; [Autistic Global Initiative](#) in Boulder, CO; [AutonomyWorks](#) also in Chicago; [Beneficial Beans](#) in Phoenix, AZ; [Extraordinary Ventures, Inc. \(EV\)](#) in Chapel Hill, NC; [Inclusion Films Workshop](#) in Burbank, CA; [Lee & Marie's Cakery](#) in Miami Beach, FL; [nonPareil Institute](#) in Plano, TX; [Poppin' Joe's Gourmet Kettle Korn](#) in Louisburg, KS; [Rising Tide Car Wash](#) in Parkland, FL; [Roses for Autism](#) in Guilford, CT; [Stuttering King Bakery](#) in Scottsdale, AZ; [Waggies by Maggie & Friends](#) in Wilmington, DE; and [\[words\] Bookstore](#) in Maplewood, NJ.

### **About Extraordinary Ventures**

Founded in 2007 by a group of concerned parents, Extraordinary Ventures (EV) is a 501(c)(3) enterprise that creates and operates a portfolio of self-sustaining small, local businesses—or “ventures”—that presently employs 40 adults on the autism spectrum or with a developmental disability. EV has five “ventures” in its portfolio—each with its own bottom line, business model, set of customers and distinct jobs suited to the full range of employees. These “ventures” comprise a wash/dry/fold laundry, office services, transit bus detailing, premium candles and soaps, and a meeting space rental operation at its headquarters.