



1 IN 10 ASHKENAZI JEWS IS A CARRIER FOR GAUCHER DISEASE



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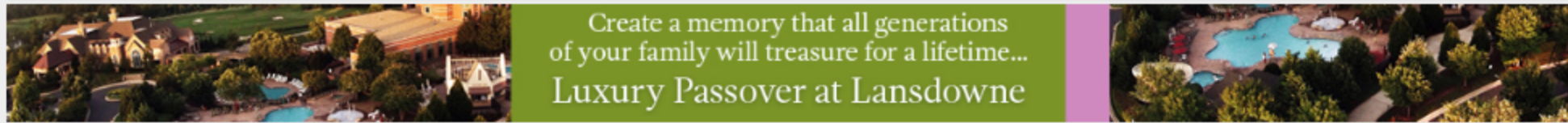


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WEDNESDAY, 22 FEBRUARY 2017



AT SUNFLOWER BAKERY, COOKIES CAN LEAD TO CAREERS FOR YOUNG ADULTS WITH LEARNING DIFFERENCES

WRITTEN BY NATASHA NADEL ON 17 FEBRUARY 2017. POSTED IN FEATURES

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Laurie Wexler, co-founder and executive director of Sunflower Bakery, had volunteered with teens with learning disabilities, teaching them filing and other office skills. Once they reach 18, she wondered, what opportunities are out there for them? At the same time, she jokes, she was hungry for a kosher *nosh* (snack) closer to her Potomac home. Several years later, these thoughts converged and the idea for the Sunflower Bakery program was born.

When Wexler ran into Sara Portman Milner, she had an "aha moment." This is the perfect person to talk to, she thought: a licensed clinical social worker, Milner was a champion of inclusion and had developed and implemented the special needs programs at the Bender Jewish Community Center of Greater Washington for 34 years.

"It was a great idea to match up kids with cognitive disabilities who need structure, routine and regimen with baking, which is all about structure, routine and regimen," said Milner, Sunflower Bakery co-founder and director of student services.



Created as a non-profit organization, Sunflower Bakery gives people with disabilities the opportunity to be competitive in

the general workforce rather than be trained to work in a bakery that only employs people with disabilities.

"It's a really important value for people with disabilities to have opportunities to be the best they can be," said Milner, "and be more like other people rather than different from them."

Sunflower Bakery's products are available through individual online orders, by phone, at Café Sunflower, and through a subscription service called "Sweets of the Month." There are numerous pick-up points throughout metro DC. Most are synagogues or schools, which receive five percent of the sales made through them—a win-win for both.

Sunflower Bakery's first pilot program with Jewish Foundation for Group Homes (JFGH) residents took place over 2009–2010, using the Beth Shalom and Talmud Torah kitchen in Potomac two afternoons a week. In February 2010, the bakery moved to its current location in Gaithersburg, Maryland.

Since the pilot program, Sunflower Bakery has provided more than 42,000 hours of training and served more than 165 young adults and teens through their employment training and summer programs.



Sunflower Bakery includes several initiatives: the Pastry Arts Employment Training Program, Café Sunflower Employment Training Program, Summer Teen Experience, and Sunflower Seeds Bnei Mitzvah Program.

Pastry Arts Employment Training Program

The heart of Sunflower Bakery is their Pastry Arts Employment Training Program, which provides the hard skills involved with pastry arts and the important soft skills of food safety and how to be a



good employee. After 10 weeks of this training, students move on to a 16-week, 20- hours-week, paid in-house internship at the bakery. Part of that internship is spending 15 hours at Café Sunflower so they can add "front of house" and customer service experience to their job skills.

As of May 2016, 46 students have graduated the Pastry Arts Employment Training Program and another 10 students will graduate this June. This year, 85% or more of graduates have been employed.

On a recent weekday afternoon, Marion Pitcher, Sunflower Bakery's pastry arts director, showed a student how to use a baking scale, helping him to get the measurement just right.

Like everyone who works for Sunflower Bakery, Pitcher exudes patience and kindness. She said that seeing the step-by-step growth in the students puts a smile on her face. "A lot of the students don't even think they can do it, but from the moment they step in here and see what they can achieve, you can see the difference in their step and how they walk. They feel good about themselves. The program makes that possible," she said.

"It lifts them up when I say, 'You can do it,'" she added.



The pastry arts program accepts one to two new students per month, on a rolling basis, and takes up to 20 students per year.

Beginning this year, Sunflower is directly assisting their students in seeking employment by creating partnerships with local food-related businesses, including Stella's Bakery. Hot



Breads & Cakes, Clyde's, Founding Farmers, Potomac 18 Caterers and others, "We stay involved, especially for the first three months, making sure it is a good match," said Wexler.

Liz Hutter, employment services director and former executive pastry chef, created the formal curriculum for the Pastry Arts Program. *Compass*, a pro bono consulting service, is currently studying the feasibility of packaging the curriculum and other aspects of the training program for replication in other communities. Wexler said their program is unique.

Currently, 53 percent of income is generated from sales with a small amount from program fees. The other 47 percent represents donations from individuals, foundations and corporations along with a grant from Montgomery County. Fundraising is critical because more than half of each day is devoted to training and supervision of our students..

In the middle of his third day in the pastry arts program, Sam Barry, 27, said he has already learned to fold batter, crack eggs and use a sifter.

"It's a good thing in life when you're learning things," said Barry. "That's always a good sign of progress. It takes some stamina to spend all the time that we do on baking... the chefs are respecting you by giving you their guidance, even though it seems they're very strict. The stricter they are on you, the more respect they're showing you for your potential."

Café Sunflower Employment Training Program

Although students in the Pastry Arts Program spend 15 hours learning customer service skills in the Café, there are other students who chose the nine-month Café Sunflower Training Program.

"There are many people who love being around food but don't have the skills to bake as far as the fine motor coordination or the stamina," said Milner. "If someone doesn't have that then the Café is another option for them."

When Sunflower Bakery found out that Jewish Federation of Greater Washington was moving, they collaborated with the Federation and JFGH to open Café Sunflower in Spring 2015 at the new headquarters in Rockville.

Besides training students in customer service, point of sale and barista skills, the other goal of Café Sunflower is for people in the community to get to know people with disabilities. "Our students know their customers and their orders," said Milner. Customers get to know the students/employees as people, not just as individuals with disabilities. "So everybody there plays an important role, they all learn from each other, and they all have something to contribute," she said.

Daphna Raskas, a past president of Berman Hebrew Academy, joined Sunflower Bakery's board six years ago and is now president. With her background, she was able to help with strategic planning and write a business plan.

The next step is to formalize the curriculum for the Café, just like the bakery program.

"We have a new café manager. You really want someone who's got the café management part but is also happy to do the training piece and he's great," said Raskas. "I like watching him just because he's so patient. He's very calming."

According to the new manager, **Joey Nowicki**, customers often come in with no idea that the Café is a non-profit or different from other coffee shops. "Café Sunflower is unique in that customers are not using their smartphones while they wait," he says. "Instead, they are interacting with the employees in a meaningful way."

"People who come in truly get a coffee *break*," he said.

Several high school teachers have brought students with disabilities to the Café, including a group managing a café in their high school. Nowicki enjoys introducing Café employees to the teens and hopes it motivates both students and teachers to see just how much these students can do in the future. He also hopes some of the students will apply to the Café training program.

"A lot of these guys have been sheltered, not really exposed to people outside of their immediate family or their school, so having interaction with the larger community is learning life skills," said Nowicki.

Summer Teen Experience

Sunflower Bakery offers three one-week summer baking classes for ages 14 to 18 geared toward teens across a spectrum of learning disabilities, ADHD, high-functioning autism and Asperger Syndrome.

After Elias Tsakiris told his mom that he wanted to work at a bakery, she found the Summer Teen Experience. He attended two years in a row. Now 20 years old, Tsakiris is in the middle of the first 10-week phase of the Pastry Arts Program.

Feivel Cohen, 20, is quite the Sunflower Bakery alum. He is a former Café employee, participated in the Summer Teen Experience, and spoke to teens at Capital Camps in Waynesboro, Pennsylvania. From among several non-profits presented, the teens chose to fund Sunflower Bakery as their summer *mitzvah* project. That donation was used to purchase the point of sale equipment for Café Sunflower.

These days, Feivel is in the Pastry Arts Employment Training Program and working towards a very specific goal: working both front and back of the house in the kosher bakery at Costco in Wheaton, Maryland.

Milner said the summer program is also an exploratory class for teens. It's mostly recreational because there aren't other cooking classes for people with disabilities. In addition to other schools, the program draws teens with learning disabilities from Sulam, a school-within-a-school at the Berman Hebrew Academy.

The Future

Having a storefront along with production and instruction space is Wexler and Milner's dream right now. They agree that if they could rent a larger space, they could also expand training opportunities to include bread baking, packing and shipping, skills transferable to other businesses and industries.

Milner wants people to buy from Sunflower Bakery, not just for their mission, but because they think their products are the best. She encourages community members to keep Sunflower Bakery in mind and make them a part of their Shabbat and *simchas* year-round.

The deadline to order hamantaschen for Purim is March 6 at noon. Go to www.sunflowerbakery.org for more information and to place orders.

Natasha Nadel is a mom, journalist and author of "The Healthy Mama's Guide to Feeding Your Family Well – Simply and Sanely!" and "The Healthy Family, Healthy You Cookbook." She has contributed to over 20 national and regional newspapers, magazines, and blogs, including The Washington Post's "On Faith and On Parenting," Lilith, JTA, Na'amat Woman, The Jewish Press, Jewish Food Experience and Kveller.com.

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