

# Nonprofit Continues to Provide Work Opportunities for the Disabled

By Sherrie Dulworth

When Gov. Andrew Cuomo signed the New York State on PAUSE Executive Order last March responding to the rapidly escalating COVID-19 cases, CAREERS Support Solutions was among the entities that quickly pivoted to adapt to the stay-at-home requirement.

Like many educational organizations, the Valhalla-based nonprofit had traditionally used an in-person curriculum, but they rapidly implemented remote learning capabilities for 25 students with special learning needs who were transitioning to enter the workplace.

Jennifer Retacco, CAREERS' program coordinator and high school transition coordinator, said that their instructors, and their students with learning, developmental, psychiatric and/or physical disabilities, were catapulted into an unfamiliar virtual classroom. For the students, it meant all day on the computer, first for their high school classes, followed by employment skills training.

"We had to add how to safely work during the pandemic to our workforce readiness curriculum," Retacco said.

That included teaching students about wearing masks, proper handwashing and safe physical distancing in anticipation of their

transition to paid internships among CAREERS' Westchester- and Putnam-based employer partners.

S&H Business Apparel and Footwear in White Plains is one such partner. Working at S&H's 40,000-square-foot warehouse and retail store, CAREERS interns learn to properly stock shelves, choose inventory, pack garments and serve as dressing room attendants.

Founded in 1969, the family-owned S&H provides uniforms and other attire for frontline workers. Deemed an essential business, it remained open throughout the health crisis.

Kevin Ross, its owner and vice president, became an advocate of supporting vocational opportunities for people with disabilities almost 20 years ago when he hired Lyle Davidson. Davidson has been a loyal and enthusiastic S&H employee ever since.

Ross has also been the CAREERS board president for the past two years.

"Our entire culture has benefited through taking care of each other," he said of hiring employees with disabilities.

Another hurdle during the early days of the pandemic was the shutdown of public transportation, which many of the workers relied



SHERRIE DULWORTH PHOTOS

Costas "Gus" Pourakis, owner of George's Place in Carmel, has employed workers with special learning needs supplied by CAREERS Support Solutions.

upon. They were eager not to miss work, and CAREERS coordinated with employer partners, co-workers and families to help them get there, Retacco noted.

"These individuals are the most dependable employees you can get," she said. "When they have an opportunity to work, they show up."

Retacco said many people who are disabled are enthusiastic for the opportunity to work. According to



Kevin Ross, left, and longtime employee Lyle Davidson at S&H Warehouse in White Plains. Davidson has worked at the apparel company for nearly 20 years.

the Department of Labor, the pre-pandemic unemployment rate for disabled workers was already more than double that of those without a disability. Then as businesses shuttered, the unemployment rate for disabled workers approached 19 percent last April.

Restaurants were among the hardest-hit industries from the crisis. Employers like George's Place, a CAREERS partner for about 10 years, were affected. The cozy Carmel restaurant with its view of Lake Gleneida was founded in 1978 by the late George Pourakis and is now owned and operated by his son, Costas, who goes by Gus, and daughter-in-law Karen Pourakis.

The eatery was able to stay open, but because of pandemic-restricted customer volume has not hosted CAREERS interns since last year.

At George's Place, CAREERS interns perform tasks such as sanitizing menus, refilling condiments, rolling napkins and silverware, delivering water to diners and bussing tables. They hope to re-engage with the program this spring.

"We now see an uptick in our workforce readiness classes and job placements since businesses are re-opening," said CAREERS Executive Director Tina Cornish-Lauria.

"CAREERS wouldn't exist without our dedicated employers," she added. "They have seen for themselves that with the right training and support, individuals with disabilities have an amazing work ethic and a positive impact on their bottom lines and workplace norms."

Pourakis said that he views helping the interns as part of community service that gives people an opportunity.

"My Dad always told me to treat people the way you want to be treated," he said.

For more information on CAREERS Support Solutions, visit [www.careersupportsolutions.org](http://www.careersupportsolutions.org).