

# Cape Abilities Farm Store Helps Local Students Learn New Skills

by Elizabeth Rudnick

In June of this year, an exciting new store opened its doors in Chatham. All summer long, just down the road from the popular Lighthouse Beach, Cape Abilities Farm to Table offered fresh, local produce, snacks, artwork, plants and more to visiting tourists and locals alike. This store is different, however, and not just because of the bright green façade of the historic building in which it is housed. The store is staffed and run by students from the Chatham High School Special Education Vocational Program in a partnership with the non-profit organization Cape Abilities.

Based out of Hyannis, Cape Abilities provides jobs, homes, and support for people with disabilities across Cape Cod. Along with Farm to Table, the organization has six other businesses located throughout the Cape including two fully functioning farms, a vending business, a thrift and consignment shop and Welcome to Cape Cod Beach Buckets.

This past year, they ventured into Chatham. Hilary Foulkes, the owner of the building in which Farm to Table is now housed, approached Cape Abilities with a proposal. He was looking to do something different with the space in his building and was interested in the work Cape Abilities did. He offered the building to the organization rent free. Cape Abilities Executive Director Tom Zurn saw this as a great opportunity to utilize the organization's two farms as well as become a part of the Chatham community. "[We] could feature some of our produce, but also do art and have partnerships with local stores," he said.

Getting the store was just the first step, however. They would need staff to run it. "Once we determined to open in Chatham," Zurn observes, "[working with the Chatham Vocational Program] seemed a good partnership." He reached out to Judy Fratus, who runs the program, and in short order, the store was staffed.

"We had 10 students who participated," Judy Fratus explained, "with a wide range of abilities." These students, who collectively clocked in over 500 hours from June until October, worked the front end of the store, doing everything from overseeing the register to taking care of the plants and stocking the shelves. Along with the day-to-day manager, Barbara Ross, there were also job coaches on site who helped the students master their tasks and guarantee that their performances were up to standard. "It was just a wonderful experience for the students," Ms. Fratus states. "[We] put kids where their skills could shine."

And it would seem that all that effort paid off. Debi Stetson, manager of community relations, observed that not only did the students "really love interacting with the customers," but that there was an equally "warm reception from the local community." Tourists wandered in on their way to the beach to pick up a snack while locals made it a point to stop and chat with the students and peruse the products.

The support came in other forms, too. When they found out that a ramp would need to be built to provide access for one of the student workers, Cape Associates built one at no cost. This sort of effort, along with the community's support, emphasizes what a truly unique and wonderful opportunity Farm to Table provides.

The store, which closed its doors on Oct. 30 for the season, is already planning on returning next summer. "We hope to start earlier next year, maybe sometime in May," Tom Zurn stated. That way, the store can introduce even more of the hanging and bedding plants that they grow at their farms while also allowing an even longer work period for the students. "It will be bigger and better," Zurn states. So while the cold may be settling in, everyone is preparing for next spring and the new opportunities that await.



Cape Associates contributed a ramp to make access easier at the Cape Abilities Farm Store this summer. COURTESY PHOTO