

Llife



"Smile Farmers" on the job at the program's flagship Moriches nursery.

Plants, purpose *and a* paycheck

SMILE FARMS GIVES DISABLED ADULTS A CHANCE TO GROW THEIR SKILLS **E2**

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Today's cover story shares the success of Smile Farms, a non-profit that partners with other organizations to create meaningful work for adults with disabilities.

In Act 2, you can read about the last chance to see Huntington cover band The Queazles.

And check out today's Faith and Seniors calendars for virtual and in-person events.

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Flower-powered jobs program

BY JESSICA DAMIANO
Special to Newsday

On a quiet stretch of Montauk Highway in Moriches, a friendly red faux silo is visible from the suburban road. But not so apparent to passersby is the life-altering impact of the business operating behind it.

Smile Farms, founded on LI in 2015, has grown to 10 regional campuses

Those who venture past the sign for Smile Farms at IGHL, up the driveway and into the retail plant nursery that sits on the 7-acre property, are greeted with rows of healthy, lush potted plants blooming as far as the eye can see. And it doesn't take a keen eye to notice the enthusiasm of the garden center's employees.

"My favorite part of working here is growing flowers, sweep-

ing the floors and keeping the floors nice and clean," says Kevin McCann, a greenhouse worker, or "Smile Farmer," who has worked at the nursery since it opened in 2015. His paycheck usually goes straight into his savings account, he said, but he did buy himself a golden ring and a silvertone cross necklace, which he wears every day.

Kevin, 67, is a resident of

IGHL — Independent Group Home Living Program Inc. — a Manorville-based organization that provides housing and services for people with intellectual disabilities in Suffolk County.

Like his 29 co-workers, Kevin, who shares a home with five housemates in Eastport, has a developmental disability. Unlike them, his brother is Jim McCann, the founder and chairman of 1-800-Flowers.com Inc., who partnered with IGHL in 2015 to create Smile Farms, which provides a sense of purpose —



At Smile Farms at IGHL, Jim McCann, left, of 1-800-Flowers, tours the Moriches greenhouse with his brother Kevin McCann, who works there.



Thirty "Smile Farmers" work at the Moriches nursery, which sells to retail customers as well as wholesale to local florists and businesses. ■ Video: newsday.com/lilife

and an income — for his brother and others like him.

"For most of us, work is a lot more than a paycheck," Jim said. "It's a reason to get up in the morning and, in many cases, it's who you are." But he remembers gathering for holidays with his extended family, most of whom work at 1-800-Flowers.com, and, he said, the conversation would always turn to "the family business."

"Kevin was never part of those conversations, but now he is," said Jim, who lives in Manhasset. "He talks about what he's growing, what he's planting, so he's part of the business,

too. And that means an enormous amount to us and him because he's contributing, too."

THE ROAD TO SMILE FARMS

Growing up in South Ozone Park, Queens, in the '50s and '60s, Jim, now 70, was the eldest of five children during what he called "the dark ages" for people with disabilities.

"There weren't many things available for disabled people, even in the schools, when Kevin was born," Jim said. So Kevin went to live at New Hope, a specialized residential school in the Catskills, "and

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A silo proclaims Smile Farms at IGH's affiliation with Independent Group Home Living Program, a nonprofit founded in 1978.

For more

Visit smilefarms.org to learn more about Smile Farms, find retail nursery locations, order Heat with Heart hot sauce or to make a donation.

ON THE COVER. Some of the Smile Farms workers transport plants at the Moriches nursery, from left: Cheryl Gromacki, Justine Bambach, Michele Reeves, Dominique Johnson (in pink shirt), Scott Dawicki, Rachel Frabizio and Gretchen Van Horst.

A growing team effort



IGHL founder Walter W. Stockton, in jacket, visits with Smile Farmers in one of the 19 greenhouses at the Moriches nursery.



Keith Caputo gets a pot ready for planting at the Moriches nursery, which grows and sells annuals, perennials and herbs.



Student and Smile Farmer Michael Mobley harvests peppers for Smile Farms' hot sauce at Nassau BOCES' Rosemary Kennedy Center.

COVER STORY from E2

every Sunday we'd all drive upstate to see him."

In 1972, WABC-TV aired "Willowbrook: The Last Great Disgrace," the award-winning Geraldo Rivera documentary that exposed deplorable living conditions and the abuse of disabled children and adults living at Willowbrook State School on Staten Island. The school and some other state facilities eventually were closed, displacing their residents.

In 1978, former Suffolk County Community College Assistant Professor Walter W. Stockton opened his first IGHIL group home in Mount Sinai to provide housing for 10 of Willowbrook's former residents. In the years that followed, he opened additional locations, and in 1987, observing the lack of jobs for people with disabilities, Stockton opened Flower Barn, a nursery in Moriches that provided employment for their residents.

Stockton, 75, of Shoreham, who today is president and CEO of Kinexion, the parent of IGHIL and six other nonprofits serving people with disabilities, and Jim McCann were introduced by a mutual friend when McCann was looking for a new home for his brother. In 1994, Kevin McCann moved into an IGHIL group home to be closer to his family.

"Jim's always been very involved with everything we do at IGHIL, and we always talked about doing something together," Stockton said.

"We had people with disabilities working [at Flower Barn]," Stockton explained, "but it was getting harder and harder to make it work because the company didn't generate enough income to really pay the salaries for 30 people." In search of a solution, he approached Jim McCann, who, with his brother 1-800-Flowers.com CEO Chris McCann, had been wanting to create a charity that their employees could feel close to and engage with.

While brainstorming with Chris and Stockton, Jim recalled feeling that "Kevin should have

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SPREADING SMILES AROUND LI AND BEYOND

There are 10 Smile Farms campuses employing some 250 farmers on Long Island, Brooklyn, Staten Island and Manhattan, with plans to expand into Westchester and elsewhere.

The flagship **Moriches campus** is a retail nursery that provides programs and services for its 30 Smile Farmers, who grow annuals, perennials and herbs in 19 greenhouses there. Plants are sold directly to the public as well as wholesale to local florists and businesses.

Smile Farmers at the **IGHL Administration Building** in Manorville and at the **Cornell Cooperative Extension** in Yaphank grow organic produce that is served at IGHL residences around Long Island.

At **Holly's Guest House**, an on-site bed-and-breakfast in Center Moriches for visiting IGHL families, Smile Farmers grow organic vegetables used to prepare meals for guests. Sweet and hot peppers grown there are also used to make Smile Farms' signature hot sauce.

At the **Viscardi Center**, in Albertson, which serves as a transitional program for adults and an educational facility for children with severe physical disabilities, horticulture is included in the science curriculum to grow a new generation of Smile Farmers. Produce grown there is donated to the Mary Brennan INN in Hempstead and For the Love of Pete's Pantry in Seaford.

Grow labs inside classrooms at the **Nassau BOCES campus** at the **Rosemary Kennedy Center** in Wantagh are used to teach developmentally disabled students about food production. Outside, students learn to grow peppers, tomatoes and other produce, some of which is used in student lunches. The rest is donated to organizations such as the Town of Hempstead Senior Center and the Meadowbrook Alternative Program at Brookside in North Merrick.

In Oakdale, **Smile Farms at Family Residences and Essential Enterprises** provides vocational training for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. FREE's Smile Farmers grow vegetables and herbs used in the organization's culinary program and



Smile Farms provides herbs to the Tap Room restaurant in Patchogue. Farmers Tommy Napoli, right, and Brandon Boscio, center, meet at the restaurant with Ryan Thorman of Upstream Hospitality Group, which runs the Tap Room.

League Education and Treatment Center of Brooklyn set up a booth to sell Smile Farms products at Down to Earth's farmers market in Park Slope last summer. From left, former staffer **Laraib Hafeez**, **Michael Morales**, **Leighton Christie**, **Anthony Gamble** and staffer **Carolyn Owens**.



LETC / JIM INTERLICCHIO

deliver "FREEpods" at no charge to more than 300 area residents who can't get out to shop. The packages typically include groceries and produce, plus recipes for preparing it provided by Small Batch, a Garden City restaurant owned by celebrity chef Tom Colicchio.

In Brooklyn, **Smile Farms at League Education and Treatment Center** serves adults and children with psychiatric and intellectual disabilities. Smile Farmers at the site tend to a sensory garden and grow food in raised beds and a hoop house.

Smile Farms at CP Unlimited provides marketable-skills

training for people with developmental disabilities and cerebral palsy working in its Staten Island greenhouses. Here, peppers are grown for Smile Farms hot sauce, and vegetables and herbs for the farmers market at NYU Langone Hospital-Long Island in Mineola.

Smile Farms at Riverpark Farm is a partnership between Smile Farms, Riverpark Farm restaurant, the Center for Family Support and Alexandria Real Estate Equities in Manhattan. The Kips Bay campus provides services for people with developmental disabilities who grow produce from May

to October to supply Riverpark Farm, the farm-to-table restaurant next door. The program has been on hiatus, however, as the former Tom Colicchio restaurant is undergoing renovation under new ownership. Still, Smile Farms' managing director Diana Martin said there are plans to continue the relationship when construction is completed.

Other partnerships include a program to provide herbs, microgreens — and soon, vegetables — to the **Tap Room**, a restaurant in Patchogue. Last year, members of the restaurant's staff spent volunteer days working alongside Smile

Farmers at the Moriches campus.

"They got their hands in the soil and planted herbs and microgreens — things they'll use in the kitchen or behind the bar, like rosemary, dill, basil," Jim McCann said. "And now the bartenders have something to talk about with customers: They can say, 'I planted this,' and tell them about Smile Farms."

McCann said that relationship has grown into a partnership. Now Tap Room buys produce from Smile Farms, which "promotes the work that people with disabilities are doing on Long Island."

— JESSICA DAMIANO



SMILE FARMS

Smile Farmer Tommy Napoli carries organic vegetables grown at Holly's Guest House.

Where employees flourish

COVER STORY from E4

been working in the community and so should the others, but I couldn't find any jobs," Jim said. "So Chris, Walter and I conjured up the idea for Smile Farms to fund employment for members of the community with special needs, and from IGHL, and be able to sell wholesale to our florists," he said. "That's how it started."

"Of the people with disabilities who are able to work, 80% of them are unemployed," Jim McCann said, "and at Smile Farms, we're trying to do something about that."

Today, Smile Farms, with a current annual operating budget of \$1.3 million, supported solely through private donations, is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization and employs more than 250 people with disabilities at its 10 partner campuses throughout Long Island, Brooklyn, Staten Island and Manhattan (see box on previous page).

VOLUNTEERS AND DONORS

Smile Farms is also the signature philanthropic partner of 1-800-Flowers.com Inc., which donates funds and the time of its employee volunteers, as well as office space and technology. In 2021, for example, 1-800-Flowers created a curated "Birthyay!" gift collection that raised nearly \$75,000 through a 20% donation of net proceeds, and the 2022 collection continues to be popular with customers, according to Smile Farms managing director Diana Martin.

Another major donor is Waldner's, the Farmingdale office-environment company, which gave \$50,000 in 2021 to sponsor the Nassau BOCES Rosemary Kennedy Center campus in Wantagh, she said.

With time, Jim McCann said he hopes to expand Smile Farms into Westchester County and elsewhere.

"A new partnership can take two years [to finalize]," said Martin, 38, who lives in Levittown. "We supply grants and work with them [the partners] to come up with programs for their campuses," she said, explaining that "they may have space, and we give them funding to build up raised beds, or a greenhouse or a garden, where there can be training and employment opportunities for



Kevin McCann, 67, has worked at Smile Farms at IGHL in Moriches since it opened. "It makes me feel good inside," he says.

Smile Farmers."

Last year, the organization spiced up its offerings. "Our League Education and Treatment Center partner in Brooklyn had the idea to start growing peppers to make hot sauce with," Martin said. So Smile Farms partnered with Brooklyn Grange, a company that constructs rooftop gardens in New York City and makes hot sauce.

Martin said the Smile Farmers plant the seeds, care for the plants and harvest the peppers. Then the peppers are packed and sent to Brooklyn Grange, where they are made into red and green hot sauces and poured into bottles bearing labels that read, "Smile Farms Heat with Heart." Brooklyn Grange then ships the finished product back to Smile Farms.

SHIPPING THE HOT SAUCE

Six "Smile Shippers" at Family Residences and Essential Enterprises, a Smile Farms partner based in Oakdale that provides housing and services for people with disabilities, fulfill orders for hot sauce placed through the online platform Shopify, boxing up bottles

to be shipped to customers.

"That's a whole new set of skills they did not have before," Martin said, highlighting expanding opportunities for Smile Farms employees, whose salaries are determined by location with the intention to maximize the workers' earnings without impacting their individual disability benefits; hours vary, too, but average about 15 hours a week.

"As money comes in, it goes back to the Smile Farms partners to create more opportunities for the farmers," Martin said. "And that's exciting for them because they not only create this product from what they grew, but they also know that when it sells, that money goes back to the people that are running the program, and they are responsible for that," she added. "Now they have the opportunity to be the empowered ones instead of the marginalized ones."

Those involved say the benefits of the programs are palpable.

"Kevin began to grow and flourish" when he became a Smile Farmer, Jim McCann

said. So did his co-workers.

At the soil table inside one of the 19 greenhouses at the Moriches campus one day in June, five Smile Farmers wearing gardening hats, gloves and aprons cheerfully chatted as they filled containers with potting mix to prepare them for planting. Others worked outside, weeding, tending to other gardening chores and restocking tables with flats of plants.

'IT FEELS REALLY GOOD'

Tanisha Coleman, 35, said she loves working at the soil table. "It's important to have a job because it's a paying job, and you get money," she said. "It feels really good to earn my paycheck."

Coleman said she uses her earnings to pay bills but is also setting money aside to take a trip with her cousin.

Her friend and co-worker Justine Bambach, 34, previously worked at Panera Bread, where, she said, she "used to wipe the tables and do the coffee pots." Bambach said she prefers working at Smile Farms. "It's a great opportunity to be here every day with my friends," she said.

"We're like a family."

After spending weekday mornings at Smile Farms, the workers participate in other activities, including packing and delivering groceries and fresh produce from Smile Farms to area residents who can't get out to shop.

"It's pretty incredible to see the faces of the people who come to work here every day," IGHL's Stockton said. "They get to plant the plant, they get to propagate the plant, and then one of the most important things is when the plant gets sold and they help people take it to their cars.

"They get to meet the community, and the community sees our guys giving back to the community," he added. "So this place integrates them into the community [and] gives them the opportunity to be . . . a successful part of that community."

"I'm thankful to Jim for starting Smile Farms," Kevin McCann said of his brother. "I'm very happy I'm working here. It makes me feel good inside, makes me feel good in my heart to help people."