

These Farms **Grow Teamwork** and Independence

Adults with disabilities **build confidence, make friends, and develop skills** in workplace. ::

BY MARISA HERMAN

At smile farms, the harvest is about far more than produce — it's about purpose.

Across 14 campuses in New York state, more than 400 adults with developmental disabilities are gaining hands-on experience in agriculture, building independence and teamwork, and feeling the reward of earning a paycheck.

Smile Farms' impact reaches far beyond its mission of creating job opportunities and training by teaching fundamental life skills that bolster confidence and growth.

"It is more than giving work to people, and more than a paycheck," said Steve McDermott, managing director of Smile Farms, based in Jericho.

"It gives them pride and purpose and personal growth."

At a time when nearly 80% of individuals with disabilities remain unemployed, Smile Farms is addressing a critical gap in the workforce.

"It is a huge need we are addressing," McDermott said. "We are taking some basic principles of agriculture and horticulture and creating a supportive environment that meets people where they are."

The idea took root in 2015, sprouted by a conversation between Jim McCann, founder and chairman of 1-800-Flowers.com, and Walter Stockton, founder and CEO of Independent Group Home Living (IGHL).

Stockton envisioned new opportunities for adults with

developmental disabilities — opportunities that would empower not only individuals, but also their families and communities.

McCann, whose brother lived in an IGHL residence in New York, recognized the potential. With that shared vision, the first Smile Farms campus blossomed.

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Farmers typically spend about a year in training, building a strong foundation in gardening. They learn how to plant, weed, harvest, and maintain crops.

Participants, known as farmers, learn the essentials of agriculture and horticulture, growing vegetables, flowers, and even producing their own specialty items.

Their crops are now featured in local restaurants



and sold at farm stands they help operate.

One standout product is their Heat With Heart hot sauce, crafted from peppers grown on-site, including bold varieties like Krimzon Lee and Helio Habanero, balanced with sweeter peppers such as Carmen and Mojo.

The program extends beyond the fields and flower beds. "Smile Shippers" package and distribute the Heat With Heart hot sauce nationwide, while "Smile Sellers" engage directly with customers at local farmers markets — further strengthening communication and business skills.

Beyond technical training, Smile Farms emphasizes personal development. Participants build confidence, form friendships, and develop the professional skills needed to thrive in the workplace.

For many, the experience is lasting. Some of the original farmers remain proudly employed in roles they describe as their dream jobs. Smile Farms' reach extends into the culinary world. Last fall, Rooted Hospitality Group featured Smile Farms spaghetti squash as the centerpiece of a special entrée at RUMBA, pairing it with pesto butter and grilled Arctic char. □

