

Oowee Products in Asheville Making a Difference



The integration of individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder into workplaces with typical peers enables them to build relationships outside their immediate families and circle of support and to develop a sense of greater connection to the community in which they live. Recently, one of the Autism Society of North Carolina's longtime partners, Oowee Products in Asheville, successfully transitioned its employees with ASD to on-site workers, making an even bigger difference in their lives.

Gabriel Hargett founded Oowee in 2009 with a mission to produce quality goods that were responsibly manufactured and sustainable in the United States. Oowee makes beverage accessories out of wood, metal, and leather that can be branded with companies' logos or an image of choice.

By 2011, demand had picked up for the company's first product, the leather pint-glass sleeve, and Hargett began looking for employees to help with production. He was strongly committed to providing employment for individuals who were differently abled and recognized that Oowee's manufacturing process involved very structured tasks, making it a good employment opportunity for those individuals.

In the Autism Society of North Carolina, Hargett found a collaborative partner with a mutual mission to provide meaningful work opportunities to people who often have limited options. ASNC joined with Hargett in his efforts to ensure that the production systems that were created by the company were accessible and understandable to all employees he would hire, including those with ASD.

For a few years, Hargett contracted with several individuals with ASD to make the products off-site. These employees learned all facets of producing the leather beverage sleeves including sewing, sorting, matching, and branding the leather, as well as labeling, packaging, and tagging the finished products. Hargett was extremely pleased with the results of the work and was thrilled that his company was not only manufacturing in the USA, but was "doing it in a way that was providing job skills and employment opportunities for individuals in need."

As demand for Oowee's products increased and the company continued to grow, ASNC and Hargett began to focus their mutual efforts on greater integration for his workers with ASD. Together, they set a goal of transitioning them from doing the work off-site, to the space in the Oowee warehouse with their typical peers.

While the benefits of integration were the ultimate focus, there were initial concerns that the transition of all employees to the Oowee warehouse would be too difficult for some of the individuals with ASD or that the unique needs of its diverse employees would

not be able to be met. But Hargett's collaboration with ASNC to identify and make needed – and often minor – accommodations resulted in a highly successful transition. As of this spring, all employees are working within his warehouse, including four individuals with autism. The transition for these employees to a fully integrated work site is a wonderful example of how individuals with ASD can be valuable members of the workforce and greater community when others recognize and value the contributions that they are ready and able to make.

Oowee is continuously improving its work environment and processes to make production more efficient and easier for its employees. Hargett is also a strong advocate for a fair and livable wage for all of his employees.

"In my opinion, our employees on the spectrum do a better job completing the task asked of them than most other individuals," Hargett said. "I enjoy working with our employees on the spectrum and the Autism Society and hope to continue to grow and employ more individuals with autism in the future."

ASNC is extremely thankful for the partnership we have had with Oowee and the model they have provided for other employers. "Individuals with disabilities, including ASD, experience less turnover than non-disabled individuals, allow access to numerous tax incentives, and return an average of \$28.69 for each dollar invested in accommodations," said David Ingram, ASNC Employment Supports Director. "With individuals with disabilities and their networks representing a \$3 trillion market segment, and 87% of customers preferring to patronize businesses hiring employees with disabilities, I'm excited to see businesses starting to understand, integrate their workforce more, and contact us seeking support in placing someone with ASD with their corporation." ■

To learn more about Oowee, go to www.ooweeproducts.com.