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How a scented candle business is empowering workers with disabilities

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Lead production assistant Frank DeMarco of Bethpage, left, and Avasha Lanham of Amityville, work together to make scented candles at Candleworks at ACLD in Bethpage last month. Credit: Barry Sloan

By Joseph Ostapiuk

joseph.ostapiuk@newsday.com [@OstapiukJ](https://twitter.com/OstapiukJ)

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Frank DeMarco pressed a wick into a glass jar before pouring in an autumnal-scented wax, filling the room with notes of pumpkin and vanilla.

DeMarco, 29, of Bethpage, is the lead production assistant at Candleworks, a handcrafted scent business that employs individuals with autism and developmental and learning disabilities. The nonprofit Adults & Children with Learning & Developmental Disabilities runs Candleworks and its apparel recycling business, RewearAble. Both are part of a workforce initiative employing seven people with disabilities.

Inside a room resembling a laboratory at [the nonprofit's Bethpage campus](#), DeMarco works alongside Avasha Lanham, 33, of Amityville, creating handcrafted candles, wax melts and other scented products that are sold at Long Island stores and on [the nonprofit's website](#).

The job involves precise calculations. The candle wax needs to be melted and then cooled to 135 degrees before it's infused with the fragrance.

Financial scents

- The nonprofit Adults & Children with Learning & Developmental Disabilities runs two businesses as part of a workforce initiative employing adults with autism, learning and developmental disabilities.
- Nonprofit officials say the work gives employees a sense of financial independence.
- Robert Ciatto, the president and CEO of ACLD, said the organization has employed about 40 workers with disabilities in various roles.

Then, it gets packaged for sale.

"I have to wait for it to cool down, and then I have to put the tops and the labels on," Lanham said. Her favorite scents include "Refresh," a citrus blend of peppermint and lemon.

Data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics [shows that 22.7%](#) of people with disabilities were employed in 2024, which remained relatively flat compared to the previous year. Adults with disabilities face hurdles when searching for a job, including the challenge of traditional job interviews and workplaces with limited accommodations, [Newsday has reported](#).

Robert Ciatto, president and CEO of ACLD, said the nonprofit provides a series of programs ranging from early schooling to vocational efforts, serving about 1,300 people on a daily basis. The organization has employed about 40 workers with disabilities in various roles, he said.

"They're treated as employees. They're not treated as someone with a disability that works here," Ciatto said. "It's feeling a sense of being a productive member of your community."

DeMarco was recently promoted after working at the business for about three years. The experience gives him confidence and a sense of financial independence.

Working at the nonprofit “allows me to kind of make my own choices,” DeMarco said. “When you have your own money coming in, you can put that towards things that you like, but also things that are important, and it feels better to get them when you’re doing it yourself.”



Lead production assistant Frank DeMarco, of Bethpage, pours hot wax into glass jars as he makes candles at Candleworks at ACLD in Bethpage on Oct. 23. Credit: Barry Sloan

Just feet away from the sweet smells of Candleworks, massive bins of clothes are sorted by fabric and condition by workers including Danny Carroccio and Karen Gropper for RewearAble, which collects and sells the clothes by the pound to companies that recycle the materials.

Carroccio, 42, of Plainview, has been working at RewearAble for eight years. He keeps an eye out for “rips” and “stains” when sorting through the roughly 17,670 pounds of clothes that come through the businesses’ doors each month.

He said he gets paid by the hour and wants “my own apartment someday.”

For almost a decade, Gropper, 65, has worked at RewearAble, sifting through the tons of donations and clothes the business takes in every year.

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“It keeps you busy,” Gropper said.



Karen Gropper sorts donated clothing at RewearAble at ACLD in Bethpage on Oct. 23. Credit: Barry Sloan

Nicholas Ragone, 26, of Bethpage, is the operation supervisor of ACLD's two businesses and oversees the employees, helping them to build job skills.

He said he feels strongly about the work that enables the employees to "live a life that they create themselves."

He sees improvement in the social and job skills of his workers, underscoring the benefit of giving an opportunity to those who may otherwise struggle to find work.

"People that have worked with my staff for longer than I have, and them telling me the difference they've seen in them, it's just rewarding to see what you could build together as a team," Ragone said.

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joseph.ostapiuk@newsday.com [X@OstapiukJ](https://twitter.com/OstapiukJ)

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