

Entrepreneur®

A New Chapter

A rescued bookstore provides a training ground for people with autism.

BY GWEN MORAN

Ellen Zimiles was walking through downtown Maplewood, N.J., over Labor Day weekend in 2008, when she noticed a disturbing sign hanging in the town's local bookstore. It said that unless someone took over the bookstore by November, it would close.

Distressed at the potential blow the closure would deal to the community, which was already suffering from the recession, Zimiles suggested to her husband, Jonah—who had recently graduated from Columbia University's Graduate School of Business and was planning to start a vocational training center for people with autism—that they purchase the store.

“Based on my business school training and knowing how difficult the independent bookstore business was, I said it might be tough,” Jonah Zimiles says. But the idea evolved the more the couple discussed it. Ultimately they decided they could use the bookstore as a training facility to help people with autism learn retail job skills and move on to larger companies. It was a cause close to their hearts: Their 14-year-old son has autism.

Within two months, the Zimilesees were the owners of Words. They immediately began hiring people with autism and since have employed more than 10 people with autism. Depending on their abilities, the employees stock shelves, check inventory, catalog books and other products, help with labeling bags and perform other duties. Besides the vocational training, the Zimilesees' small business also provides a welcoming place for families who have children with disabilities to shop.

“I find it very difficult with our son, because while he's getting better, it's hard to take him places because his behavior can be sort of odd,” Jonah says. “We've gotten the word out to say, ‘Please, please, please bring your kids in.’ Families can feel comfortable here.”

Words sells a line of greeting cards made by people with autism, and the business attracts speakers who address subjects of concern to people who have disabilities or have children with disabilities. The store also stocks a wide selection of books on those topics, although it is very much a mainstream bookstore. (Yes, it carries the Twilight series.) And like any good community business, Words supports as many local events and fundraisers as it can.



The store also has drawn some big names who like what the Zimilesees are trying to accomplish. Recent speakers include former New Jersey Gov. Thomas Kean and former New York Gov. Mario Cuomo. In addition, the venue, which the Zimilesees moved to a larger space last year, regularly hosts authors of all genres who discuss topics related to their books.

For Jonah, who graduated from law school nearly 28 years ago and has worked as an attorney, national director of planned giving and endowments for the United Jewish Communities and stay-at-home father, this latest career turn is exceptionally rewarding.

“I never thought I would start my own business, but as this opportunity came around, I felt like my education and the social enterprise program [of Columbia Business School] made me well equipped for it,” he says.

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