Bloom

Where You're Planted

Kati Mac offers room to grow for employees with special needs

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Each year, about one in every 700 babies is born with Down syndrome, a condition caused by an extra chromosome. While researchers don't know just what causes it, they have determined that the age of the mother can be a factor, and that mothers over the age of 35 are more likely to have a baby with Down syndrome. Since I had my children at the ages of 41 and 43, this was something I was paying attention to.

I'd also grown up with an uncle who had Down syndrome, my mother's brother, Donald. He died when I was 15 but I have vivid memories of him. He lived with my grandparents his entire life. I've never met a more upbeat person. He would sit at the window and keep my grandmother informed of everything that was happening on their Southwest Philly street. While his intellectual abilities were profoundly limited, he had an excellent memory. Friends and family sent him cards on every occasion, which he treasured, and you could hold one up and he'd tell you immediately who sent it, no matter how long ago it had been. Similarly, you could show him a photo of almost everyone he'd ever met, and he'd identify them. While he wasn't much of a hugger, he would often find my grandmother wherever she was in the house and go up to her, stand very close, and sort of pat her. It was my favorite thing about him.

While he was unable to work, there were also no real programs or support systems in place at that time for people with Down syndrome or their families. Fortunately, times have changed, both nationally and right here in West Chester.

> *"Elaine founded the nonprofit Chester County Down Syndrome Interest Group... She found there was no support or groups, or even much information out there, so she went ahead and founded one."*

Colleen Brennan and Elaine Scott are partners and co-owners of Kati Mac Floral Designs on High Street. Both have daughters with Down syndrome; Colleen's daughter Katie is 14 and going to Henderson High next year; Elaine's daughter

Looking out the window of Kati Mac onto High Street.

Emily is 25 and works at Kati Mac. "We met after Katie was born," Colleen told us. "Elaine founded the nonprofit Chester County Down Syndrome Interest Group, CCDSIG. She started it when Emily was one; she found there was no support or groups, or even much information out there, so she went ahead and founded one. We were both on the board and are now good friends."

The two women shared a vision, although they'd never discussed it: "Having a place where people with special needs could not only be trained and could work, but where they could feel super valued and feel part of a team," Colleen said. "And then Elaine came to me just over a year ago and said 'we have an opportunity I'd love to talk to you about.'"

That opportunity was the flower shop. "Elaine came to me about Kati Mac, and although I'd been off the board for years, I was still active in the community," Colleen told us. "We decided to do this personally. We spent six months research-



ing the flower business and discussing whether we thought it would work for us, both as families and in the community. So, we started the transition, which of course involved talking with Ashlee and "Hey, are you up for this?"

That would be Ashlee Smith, who has been with Kati Mac and its various changes for six years. She is the shop manager, lead designer, and official flyer of the plane. "And if she wasn't up for it, we probably wouldn't have done it," Colleen said. "We needed an established presence and talent here; she's flipped every single switch that has to be turned on or turned off in this place. We took over in June. Between June and December, I'd say we were trying to help her, when really Ashlee was just helping us all piece together how we were going to launch this whole idea."

For a while there, Ashlee was a one-man band, running the show after the pandemic. "I did bring back one of my assistants, and she's still here," Ashlee told us. "And then it was the two of us for a long time until Elaine and Colleen came

Emily Scott works at Kati Mac Floral Design, the shop where her mom is the co-owner, along with other members of the community with special needs.

in. And we have a whole team now, which is just fantastic. From my perspective, as someone who went from just being a designer in a flower shop to having Elaine and Colleen walk in here and have this all up and running within six months has just been incredible, absolutely incredible. And it is such an amazing and positive environment to work in."

"While Ashlee was unbelievably gracious in staying on and being fully 'I'm in,' we needed to hire someone who could work with our employees," Colleen said. "But working with them, as Ashlee would be, is something you'd have to be okay with and luckily for us, Ashlee was. Everyone who was in place here has been unbelievably willing to say 'sure – we can make this work.' We're very fortunate."

The person they hired was Christy Rainey, who is responsible for the management and training of the four paid

Q&A WITH EMILY

What is the best part of your job? My co-workers.

What's part of your work that you like doing best? Cutting off the stems and pulling off the leaves.

Do you have a favorite flower? Yes! Pink roses.

Is there a tough part of your job that you don't like? No—I like all of it.

What are you planning to do with the money you make? I don't know yet. I've been saving it, maybe for a watch.

What was it like to be on TV? Well, it was my first time.

Do you think you'll be on TV again? Yes, probably.

If you weren't working here, what would be your dream job? Anything with flowers!

Sounds like you already have your dream job! Do you know how lucky you are? Yes. I know I am.



From left to right: Co-owners Elaine Smith and Colleen Brennan; Christy Rainey who manages the employees and trainees with special needs; and Ashlee Smith, Kati Mac's shop manager and lead designer.

employees with special needs and the two who are placed with the shop by transitional programs right out of high school. "Before I worked for Kati Mac, I worked as a full-time nanny," Christy told us. "I left my job as a personal care assistant at a local school district to work as a nanny. When Colleen and Elaine approached me during their talks about this opportunity, I couldn't say no!"

"We did feel it was important to hire someone specifically to train and work directly with our employees and we're so excited to say that we now have six individuals with special needs working here," Colleen added—among them, Emily Scott. "Christy works with them, trains them, helps them clock in and clock out. We have two ways in which we can have people in the shop working: hiring them outright, or through these special transitional programs to provide training."

Christy was also new to the flower business. Given that processing flowers is a large part of what the employees do, "I had to learn a lot about flowers so that I could train the incoming employees. During that process, I developed a newfound love of flowers. I don't design, I'm not an artist, but I can do everything else flower related! I'm also learning a lot about running a small business, something I've never been involved with before."

According to Ashlee, however, Christy has become an asset not just in her own duties, but in shop duties. "Christy, who was brought in to do a specific job, has thrown herself in completely and now helps in the shop all the time," Ashlee said. "She recently set up a wedding with me!"

> *"All of the six individuals with special needs are part-time — some because they have other jobs!"*

Christy says her job is both rewarding and challenging, but she clearly loves it. "The challenging part is figuring out which personalities work best for specific tasks. And the most rewarding part is when they walk in the door! They always show just how happy they are to be here at Kati Mac."

Once they realized that this venture was a go, Elaine and Colleen formed a new nonprofit, The Kati Mac Education Foundation, which supports the flower shop. So, if you buy flowers here, you're supporting the work of the foundation.

"All of the six individuals with special needs are part-time—some because they have other jobs!" Colleen said. "They are some of the busiest people! Christy works out all of the shifts; we wanted to start out small but that could change over time. I couldn't be prouder of the fact that we have people with special needs working here all the time. I really do think that this marriage of flowers and people with special needs is just so great."

There were a lot of practical matters to be taken into consideration right from

the beginning. "Retail is so different from my previous career," Colleen said. "When I left my previous job at 5pm, my day was over. This is constant. And goal number one is to stay here!" Colleen said. "So, we have to keep costs under control, because the goal is to make this work in the long run. And it's expensive. Flowers are expensive, and I feel very strongly about having talented people here, so that means a healthy payroll. So, we try to cut costs where we can."

And they hit upon a genius idea. People were asking both of the women what they could to help. "Friends of mine, acquaintances; so many people say, 'how can I help?' It took us some time to figure out a way for all of these people to help us and finally it was like 'What about deliveries?' So, deliveries it was. We deliver flowers every day. And all of our deliveries—all of them—are done by volunteers. For instance, I'm delivering today. We use a program called SignUpGenius for every day except Sunday, when we are closed. And if we don't fill all of those slots, it's Elaine or me. We have also reopened on Mondays, and I come in on Mondays and process flowers with a friend because it's usually everyone else's day off."

Kati Mac is still, at the end of the day, a full-service florist, says Ashlee. "Weddings, proms, Mother's Day, deliveries, etcetera," she told us. "We have also started the transition in the front of the shop to a little bit more of a gift shop. We used to be focused fully on flowers; now we keep a ton of plants in stock, and locally made candles, honey, and prints by local artists. We're trying to keep everything community-based, including getting flowers from local growers and farmers when we can. The local community is totally our focus."

"I feel very strongly about having talented people here"

And now that things are slowly returning to as normal as it's going to get for a while, the shop is picking up steam as well. "Especially when the weather warms up, people are buying more flowers," Ashlee said. "Valentine's Day and Mother's Day are of course our busiest times, and there always seems to be a prom on Mother's







Kati Mac has potted, planted and freshly cut floral arrangements and individual plants available.

Day weekend, and sometimes even a wedding, which is kind of a double shot. Just this month it's really picked up and we're so thankful. Plus, people in the community are starting to realize we have more to offer than flowers."

The inclusion of employees with special needs sets Kati Mac apart, but the supportive environment really goes beyond that. "I have no problem envisioning our employees doing anything else in the shop," says Ashlee. "It's no different to me than hiring a college kid. Some are better just processing flowers, others might want to move into designing, others with customer service. The lesson here is that anyone with special needs can potentially work anywhere."

That sentiment is music to Colleen's ears. "I can't tell you how great Ashlee's comment makes me feel as the mom to a child with special needs. You don't want your child automatically relegated to 'okay you can bag the groceries or sweep the floor, but that's it.' You want your child to be able to grow and have opportunities. We are so lucky to be able to provide that here."

When I was in my twenties and living alone in Lancaster, PA, one of my favorite things to do every Friday was to visit Central Market, the farmers market in the middle of town, and buy myself a bunch of flowers.

In my thirties and in full-on DINK territory, my then-fiancé and I bought a house in Ardmore, and my Friday flower spot became the farmers market in Suburban Square, or occasionally the original Carlino's location. These days—divorced and supporting two kids—I had to kick my Friday flower habit and ax it from my budget.

But a couple of Fridays ago, I bought myself a gorgeous bouquet at Kati Mac after meeting with them for this story. And my purchase not only beautified my environment, but it went towards supporting an excellent cause. I love it when that happens.