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The Cupcake Crew shows off its wares.

RISING BAKERS

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THEIR RECIPE FOR AN

After graduation, a special-ed class goes into the baking business

BY JESSICA DAMIANO
Special to Newsday

At 10 a.m. on a recent Thursday, members of the Cupcake Crew receive their assignment for the day — snickerdoodle — and get to work. They don aprons and hairnets, wash their hands and gather supplies.

Ryan Dunau, 22, removes two cupcake trays from a rolling cart, and Zalydia Wright, 23, lines them with paper cups. Michael Correia, 22, shakes a bottle of pure vanilla extract and pours out a spoonful, and Patricia Graca, 23, retrieves milk from the refrigerator. Michael Bunt, 21, is in charge of adding cinnamon, and Sean Mallon, 24, starts the mixer, stopping to scrape the bowl as needed, but not before Christina Mistretta, 22, cracks three eggs — and a joke — “egg-cellent!” she quips — and Correia chimes in: “That’s how you do it!” Everyone applauds.

They ‘Flour to Empower’

Special Sweets offers a rotating menu of cupcake flavors, including ones that incorporate Nutella, Reese’s Peanut Butter Cups and M & Ms, and gluten- and dairy-free versions.

All are available in Classic (\$15 for a pack of six) and Mini (\$15 for 12) sizes.

They can be ordered for pickup or delivery at special-sweets.net, or via Facebook Messenger @specialsweetsfourtwo or Instagram Direct Message (@special-sweets4u2), or by calling 516-637-8262.

— JESSICA DAMIANO



Patty Castrogiovanni, second from right, and Barbara Giglio, fourth from left, with the Cupcake Crew. ■ Video: newsday.com/LILife

The Cupcake Crew isn’t working at a commercial bakery. Its members, all neurodivergent (an inclusive term meant to describe those with intellectual and developmental disabilities) and most of whom have autism, make up Special Sweets, a baking operation based in Miss Patty’s Westbury home.

Miss Patty is Patty Castrogiovanni, 48, a registered behavior technician who for 14 years worked as a teacher’s assistant

at Carle Place High School, spending 10 of those years in the classroom with the young adults who currently operate Special Sweets. The students became like a family, she said, as they were in the same class from kindergarten through age 21.

With their June 2021 graduation approaching, Castrogiovanni grew concerned about the students’ futures. “The parents were faced with these kids being separated for the

first time in their lives,” she said.

Castrogiovanni sprung to action last April, and using “thousands of dollars” of her own money, formed A Special Place for Me as a New York State not-for-profit corporation and is awaiting IRS designation as a nonprofit. It aims to continue the life-skills lessons taught in high school and, more importantly, keep the students connected, she said.

From April through June,

Castrogiovanni met with parents, and together they brainstormed a plan. But with COVID-19 health precautions in place, day trips, off-site volunteer opportunities and internships would not be possible.

“We were in the midst of COVID, and there were no available programs whatsoever,” said Mistretta’s mother, Julie Mistretta. “We were so fortunate to have Miss Patty, and what better than to give

ENTERPRISE



In addition to baking, the young people in Patty Castrogiovanni's A Special Place for Me take trips to malls, the library and out to lunch, learning and staying connected.



Pat Graca, left, and Zalydia Wright practice icing cupcakes made to test a new flavor with help from Barbara Giglio, center, who came out of retirement to join the program.

my kid to somebody that was already their aide?"

One question remained, however: How would the group be engaged amid widespread closures?

"All the kids like to bake," Castrogiovanni said, so "we came up with this cupcake idea" and registered as a Home Processor under the state's so-called cottage laws.

Further conversations with



ON THE COVER. Members of Special Sweets show off their signature colors and cupcakes, which they bake at the home of Patty Castrogiovanni.

See COVER STORY on E8

A Special Sweets day



1 BEHIND THE SCENES. Christina Mistretta, left, who uses her computer savvy to keep track of orders and payments, works with Patty Castrogiovanni.



2 MARCHING ORDERS. Michael Bunt, left rear, Zalydia Wright, Michael Correia and Ryan Dunau read the recipe and gather ingredients for an order.



3 CHECKING AMOUNTS. Michael Correia, second from left, measures vanilla with Ryan Dunau, Sean Mallon, Michael Bunt and Christina Mistretta.

Continues on next page

Lifelong bonds feed venture

COVER STORY from E6

parents finessed the plan: Each student would choose a signature color (a nod to the puzzle-piece logo popularized as a symbol for autism) and cupcake recipe. But because the bakers weren't confident in their skills, Julie Mistretta volunteered to frost the cupcakes after they were baked — and teach the Cupcake Crew how to do so.

"Once they become proficient," Castrogiovanni said, they will frost the cupcakes independently. For now, the bakers finish their products by adding decorative candy bits.

FILLING A NEED

Working with the school district's transition coordinator, Castrogiovanni helped parents apply for services through New York State's Office for People with Developmental Disabilities, which eventually will fund their children's participation in the program.

So far, two of the young people have been approved, and as a direct service provider of life skills services, Castrogiovanni receives payment from the OPWDD for their participation. The shortfall is covered by her own money as well as donations, she said.

Special-needs students receive services while in school, but "once they hit 21," Castrogiovanni said, "it's as if they fall off a cliff."

According to the advocacy organization Autism Speaks, an estimated 707,000 to 1.1 million teens will age out of school-based autism services in the next decade in the United States. And, the organization says, as many as 80% of adults with autism — including roughly 50% of 25-year-olds — are unemployed or underemployed.

In 2020, the most recent year for which statistics are available, New York's OPWDD provided services for 27,434 of those with autism as a primary diagnosis, according to Jennifer O'Sullivan, the agency's director of communications. Of those, 6,445 were Nassau residents; 7,974 lived in Suffolk. The agency does not track the number of children who age out of the system each year.

"Parents have difficulty because all the help they had [when their children were in school] disappears," Castrogiovanni said. "If you're a full-time working parent, what are the kids going to do from 9 to 5?"

Julie Mistretta said her daughter would be home on the computer every day, making video compilations of her favorite childhood TV shows

for YouTube.

"This is absolutely better," she said. "It's social time, and she's come so far in interacting with others just by spending time with her peers. Had she been stuck in the house during COVID, I don't know what would have happened."

She said she has seen a transformation in her daughter since she began baking with the Cupcake Crew. "She does a lot of things more independently and has age-appropriate conversations with us. She'll ask how your day was and tell you appropriate things about her day. That wasn't the case before," she said, adding that "knowing she is in safe hands is the biggest relief for my family and me."

Jeannie Dunau says her son has grown, as well. "Ryan takes the initiative now," she said. "He loads the dishwasher before I get home to surprise me. Everything he does around the house has picked up more [since he started baking with Special Sweets]," she said. "He's gotten a lot of praise for the cupcakes, which are delicious, and that has given him more confidence."

When the students approached graduation, Jeannie Dunau said, "it was breaking my heart to think they were breaking up. It's hard to be 22 and feel like there's nothing you're striving for. It's so special to see him feel like he has a purpose," she said. "They're the most special group of individuals I've ever met. Patty has really kept them together, and I don't think you'll find anybody else that would go to such extremes to do that."

After launching Special Sweets on the students' June 23 graduation date, Castrogiovanni spread word throughout the community, and on Facebook and Instagram. Pretty soon, orders — as well as donations of packaging and baking supplies — were pouring in, giving the endeavor a head start.

In August, Barbara Giglio, 66, a former Carle Place teacher's assistant certified in Applied Behavioral Analysis who had worked with the group for three years, came out of retirement to help. "As soon as I heard what she was doing, and who she was doing it with, there was no hesitation," Giglio said.

Every morning at 7 a.m., Castrogiovanni and Giglio head in different directions to pick up students from their homes and convene at Castrogiovanni's house around 9 a.m. "First, we have our morning meeting to go over

Continued from E7



4 GETTING INTO THE MIX. Michael Bunt sets about mixing batter for the order. The volume of orders determines how many days a week the crew bakes.



5 TIME TO PREP. Zalydia Wright puts cupcake papers into baking tins as Michael Correia, Ryan Dunau and Michael Bunt work in the background.



6 INTO THE CUPS. Michael Correia scoops the batter into the prepared tins, flanked by Zalydia Wright, left, Sean Mallon and Michael Bunt.

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7 THE HEAT IS ON. Michael Bunt, left, and Sean Mallon prepare to put batches of cupcakes into the oven to bake.



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10 FINISHING TOUCHES. The Cupcake Crew decorates the frosted cupcakes with various toppings, including chocolate chips and candies.



LINDA ROSIER

8 TIME TO COOL. Pat Graca, Christina Mistretta and Zalydia Wright take the baked cupcakes out of the tins and put them on racks to rest before frosting.



LINDA ROSIER

11 ASSEMBLING ORDERS. After the baking and decorating phases are complete, the focus shifts to packaging orders.



LINDA ROSIER

9 LOOKING FROSTY. Julie Mistretta applies frosting to the cupcakes with Pat Graca, left, Zalydia Wright, Sean Mallon, Michael Bunt and Michael Correia.



LINDA ROSIER

12 THAT'S A WRAP. The cupcakes are ready for in-person delivery or pickup, and each bag goes out with a Special Sweets business card.

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Newsday



Each crewmember of Special Sweets came up with their own signature cupcake.

LINDA ROSIER

Right ingredients for a Cupcake Crew

COVER STORY from E8

orders we have, take inventory and determine our baking, shopping and delivery days for the week," Castrogiovanni said.

BAKING AND MORE

Depending on the week's orders, the Cupcake Crew bakes between one and three days per week; then Castrogiovanni and Giglio drive them around Long Island to make in-person deliveries. Occasionally, the group sells the baked goods at street fairs or other events and fulfills large orders for fundraisers and birthday parties.

Most of the proceeds are used to buy baking supplies, Castrogiovanni said, with a portion set aside for future expansion.

Once or twice a month, Giglio takes the group on day trips "into the community, to malls, the library, out to lunch, where they place their own orders, pay for their own meals [with their own money], collect their own change and learn as they go," she said.

The students each lend unique strengths and abilities to Special Sweets.

Graca, for instance, who is adept at Googling information on her phone and loves social media, set out to improve the way frosting is applied to cupcakes, Castrogiovanni said.

"Sometimes we have to make eight different frostings in one day," Giglio

said, and that results in waste. "So, Patricia went on TikTok and found a way to do it that saves time, money and product." Mistretta, meanwhile, is computer savvy and uses spreadsheets to track cupcake orders and payments.

"They all have a high attention to detail," Castrogiovanni said. A typical person "might leave well enough alone, but they'll say, 'no, this isn't perfect,' and work hard until it is."

Castrogiovanni is working hard, as well.

"When every student is approved for services, and the program officially has confirmed nonprofit status," Castrogiovanni said, she and Giglio plan to "apply for grants and hopefully get an influx of opportunities, then move it out of the house and into a commercial location where we can take on more students, bake and open a cupcake cafe."

At that point, "the kids will be employees, but the legalities are that they can only earn so much because of the services they receive," she said.

"This is truly my calling," Castrogiovanni said, choking back tears. "The way it has worked out is we were meant to stay together, and every day this gets reaffirmed to me. It's been bumpier than I've anticipated in many ways, but for me, in a nutshell, it's my mission, my calling, my heart."

As for Mistretta, she thinks the whole thing is "egg-citing!"