

Florida Operator Raises Autism Awareness

By Erica Shatzer

Since 2005, Todd Ruderman, owner of Miami, Fla.-based Value Store It Self Storage, has been doing his part to add value to the lives of people with autism. Ruderman and his wife, Liz, began supporting the University of Miami-Nova Southeastern University Center for Autism and Related Disabilities (UM-NSU CARD) after their son, Jack, who is now eight years old, was diagnosed with the developmental disorder at 22 months old. Over the years since his son's diagnosis, Ruderman has been active in raising funds and creating awareness for UM-NSU CARD.



Ruderman helped UM-NSU CARD collect \$70,000 in donations to purchase the non-profit organization's "mobile autism clinic." The mobile autism clinic is a van that provides information and evaluations for people with questions about autism spectrum disorders. He also was involved with implementing Florida's autism license plate. The license plates generate awareness about autism and raises funds for autism services. For each plate that is purchased, \$25 is donated to the Florida Autism License Plate fund and supports services and awareness throughout Florida. To create awareness as well, Ruderman has informative messages about autism on the loading doors of five moving trucks at his self-storage facilities in Miami.

In addition to the many ways Ruderman has created awareness for autism and UM-NSU CARD, he has helped raise money for the Dan Marino Foundation through its "WalkAbout Autism" fundraiser. Last year, Value Store It facilities raised more than \$1,200 for the "WalkAbout Autism" by selling paper footballs to customers for \$1 each. The company participated in the 2012 "WalkAbout Autism" on Jan. 28. Value Store It facilities also host



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annual family day events and yard sales to raise money and awareness for autism. Additionally, Ruderman has been making a positive impact by serving on the UM-NSU CARD's constituency board for more than two years.

About UM-NSU CARD

UM-NSU CARD is a non-profit organization that provides a comprehensive outreach and support program for people with autism and related disabilities, their families, and the professionals who work with them. According to the organization's website, www.umcard.org, UM-NSU CARD "serves both children and adults of all levels of intellectual functioning who have autism, pervasive developmental disorders, dual sensory impairments, or sensory impairments with other disabling conditions." UM-NSU CARD offers various services including individual and family support services, program consultation and technical assistance, parent and professional training, and public awareness and community outreach. The organization's goal is to optimize the potential of people with autism, dual sensory impairment, and related disabilities through its support and assistance.

"UM-NSU CARD serves individuals with autism spectrum disorders (ASDs) across the lifespan in Miami-Dade, Broward, and Monroe counties and all of our services are free," says Deborah Chin, the coordinator of adult and transition services for UM-NSU CARD. "Value Store It has been particularly supportive of our efforts to enhance employment opportunities for adults—so much so that they became the first employer to join Project EAARN, our employment initiative, and hire an adult with autism."

Project EAARN

Project EAARN, which stands for Employment for Adults with Autism Resource Network, is an employment initiative developed by the UM-NSU CARD. The mission of Project EAARN is to

enhance the lives of adults with autism through employment. The program connects employers, employees, and job coaches to increase employment opportunities for adults with autism.

A 2007 survey of UM-NSU CARD constituents found that 88 percent of adults with autism want to work but 63 percent are not working. This discouraging statistic is why Project EAARN is so important. The program helps adults with autism and related disabilities, like Ramon Matos, find employment. Matos is a 1993 graduate of the University of Miami, holds a degree in broadcast journalism and plays bass guitar. He has worked for a hospital and for a cruise line, but since October, 2010, he's been working as a part-time storage



consultant/assistant manager for Value Store It Self Storage. Matos was hired to work at the company's Virginia Gardens facility through UM-NSU CARD's Project EAARN.

"They may look at me and say he's very normal looking, but if you look closely you see the traits," says Matos. The traits Matos is referring to are those of Asperger Syndrome, a high-functioning form of autism.

Project EAARN has helped Matos become more self-sufficient and confident. Matos says his experience at Value Store It has transformed his life. He believes in himself and his abilities, enjoys training new employees, and aspires to grow within the company. "I would love to manage a property," says Matos. "My opportunities are wide open. It has been a brilliant experience and I don't want it to end."

And his employers have nothing but praise for his job performance. "He is

our biggest fan and promoter," says Ruderman. "He is almost always on time and very concerned about doing his job well. He is a joy to be around and he helps other employees grow too." Ruderman is so pleased with Matos' performance that the company plans to hire more autistic adults through Project EAARN. "It's a good fit for the industry and it's very rewarding. It adds value to the company."

Byran Lekas, vice president of storage operations for Value Store It, wholeheartedly agrees. "It is a program that we will continue to expand," he says.

Project EAARN is a win-win scenario for both the employees and the employers. Matos is proof that the program helps adults with autism and related disabilities learn new skills, increase their independence, boost their self-esteem, and improve their quality of life. Furthermore, companies such as Value Store It benefit from great employees and increased profitability through improved employee retention. In fact, employees with disabilities are as much as 50 percent more likely to stay with a company, thus reducing the costs associated with turnover.

Hiring autistic adults adds value to a brand, garners customer support, and generates positive community visibility. Some businesses may qualify for the



Work Opportunity Tax Credit (WOTC) that will pay up to 40 percent of the first \$6,000 of an eligible employee's wages.

Support The Cause

Did you know that one in every 110 children in the United States has autism? Moreover, according to the Center for Disease Control, it's the fastest growing



developmental disorder. In an effort to educate the public about autism and create autism awareness, the Autism Society designated April as National Autism Awareness Month in the 1970s. Here's how you can make a positive difference in the lives of people with autism:

- **Make a donation.** Because UM-NSU CARD offers its services free of charge, it relies on donations to continue serving people with autism and related disabilities throughout Florida. Monetary donations can be made online by visiting www.umcard.org.
- **Hire an autistic adult.** If you operate a business in Florida and would like more information about hiring an autistic adult through Project EAARN, please contact Deborah Chin at (954) 262-8555 or dchin@psy.miami.edu. Operators with businesses located outside of Florida are encouraged to contact Best Buddies International, a nonprofit organization that creates employment and leadership development for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities, at www.bestbuddies.org for information about hiring a disabled adult. 



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