

GROWERTALKS

Under an Acre

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Gardening From the Heart

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Everyone has their own reason for coming into the gardening industry. For Jan Pilarski, the impetus to create a farm business came from her love for her son Chris Tidmarsh.

A Hope College chemistry and environmental science graduate, Chris had hopes to enter into a science-related career. However, as a young adult with autism, he struggled in a traditional workplace—a struggle that's not uncommon for individuals with autism.

Over the years, Chris had developed an avid interest in science, and farming in particular. His college internships included organic growing, where he spent several summers at the White Violet Center for Eco Justice affiliated with St. Mary's of the Woods College near Terra Haute, Indiana. It was here that Chris learned about season extension and sustainable agriculture.

Jan saw Chris' passion and interest in farming. Wanting to find work that was meaningful for her son, Jan decided to be entrepreneurial about the situation and carve out her own career path. Together, the mother and son team decided to create an environment that would allow the abilities of those individuals with autism to flourish. Individuals with autism often prefer to work in an environment that's highly structured and scientific—two factors that are in place in the horticultural industry. Instead of becoming boggled with the details, Chris thrived at learning about the science in growing, from amending the soil to water chemistry.

"It was about looking at the situation differently, instead of a problem, seeing potential," says Jan. "Farming is a way to benefit the entire community and it was something that Chris had developed a passion for."

Growing up on a family farm in Milwaukee provided Jan with the work experience needed to begin this type of venture. It was this shared knowledge and love for growing that helped both Chris and Jan become business partners. Before finalizing the plan, Chris and Jan invested time touring several area farms. It was during this process that they came across an aquaponic farm. Instantly they knew that this type of venture would be perfectly suited for their community. The water chemistry and extreme precision and monitoring required for an aquaponic farm were all aspects that would appeal to the young autistic adults that Jan hoped to employ in the operation.



Jan Pilarski opened Green Bridge Growers in South Bend, Indiana, with her son Chris (pictured) to offer a place for individuals with autism like him to work and learn.

During the next four years, Jan and Chris diligently worked to put all the pieces in place to form the operation of Green Bridge Growers in South Bend. To further her commitment to the business, Jan made the decision to leave her full-time position at St. Mary's College.

"That was a pivotal moment for us," says Jan. "Converting to part time at St Mary's provided us both the income we needed and the freedom to get started."

To increase her small business knowledge, Jan applied to a business incubator program through Notre Dame University that was developed to help social enterprises. During this business boot camp, she increased her understanding of funding, start costs and truly learned about the details that are involved with a start-up enterprise.

"The idea was that we would also enter the business plan competition in the spring," said Jan. "We wrote the plan primarily with aquaponics as our signature growing method."

The collaboration with the higher education institutes in the area and with four graduate students from Notre Dame helped to both develop the plan and bring the project to fruition.

"We won the social impact prize," says Jan. "We used the funds from that as part of the start-up cost as the first aquaponics greenhouses."

With a business plan in place, Jan and Chris approached an agency in South Bend that served a community of individuals with disabilities. The director fully supported the initiative, offering to have a pilot greenhouse on their site.

"This allowed us to not only pilot the farm, but to train individuals with autism and other disabilities in a structured way," says Jan.

While maintaining the initial pilot program, Jan and Chris began the land search to raise additional funds to develop the first aquaponics greenhouse. Donations from the crowdfunding campaign and from individuals in the community further helped make the dream of Green Bridge Growers into a reality.

"We started building the commercial aquaponic greenhouse last summer on the site of a former ornamental nursery," says Jan.

In the meantime, some of the local foundations expressed an interest in what Green Bridge Growers was doing. As a direct result, they were able to begin a training program, including more advance training for individuals who could prospectively work on the farm once it opened.

Through grants, Green Bridge Growers are continually developing the techniques and training methods that work best for the autistic community. One of their board members and partners has shared her expertise, including incorporating tools for both visual learners and the structured steps that will assist the autistic learner.

“She really makes a strong contribution through what she does, both because she understands autism and the practice of farming,” said Jan.

The last few months have been very busy for Green Bridge Growers. Currently, they’re completing a fish house that’s adjacent to a shade greenhouse that will make up the aquaponic structure. In addition, Green Bridge Growers will have a high tunnel, providing two methods of growing. Currently, the core workforce includes four trainees—all young adults with autism—and a business team with specific expertise that have contributed to the work of the project.

“Everyone has a particular niche and something they contribute and learn from us,” said Jan.

Each weekend, the Green Bridge Growers team welcomes a crew of volunteers, including civic groups, schools and university clubs—all who’ve come to support the venture and assist with the construction. Their plan is to cycle in the water in the late spring and produce the crop by the summer.

“A lot of things are coming in line at the same time, which has been very exciting,” said Jan.

As an offshoot of the current project, Green Bridge Growers—in conjunction with a local professor—has also created a middle school curriculum for at-risk students. Here, they introduce the students to farmers and farming concepts, helping spread the mission of what Green Bridge Growers does within the community.

“I feel very supported in the work that we are doing out of the interest of the academic areas who do really want to see individuals with autism flourish and grow,” says Jan.

Green Bridge Growers may have started off as a venture developed by Jan and Chris, but it has truly become the dream of an entire community. The continual effort and support of these partnerships has transformed this project into a reality. **GT**

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