

Allies, Inc. and Social Enterprises

Elise Tretola 23 March 2017

Allies, Inc., founded in 1999, is a not-for-profit provider agency, serving over 360 people in 17 counties in New Jersey. Initially conceived as a mission to provide a better way for people with disabilities to live and work in the community, Allies has evolved into an agency that guides the course for new technologies and practices. As an affiliate of Woods Services and in partnership with the other Woods affiliates, Allies harnesses the ability to pave the way to better services throughout the Northeastern United States. It is our responsibility to our wide range of customers to ensure that the most current technologies and practices are available, and that outmoded technologies and systems are laid to rest.

Social enterprises have received a great deal of attention in recent times. Perceived as a contemporary and accepted model, social enterprises are widely embraced by agencies with missions and visions similar to ours. Communities at large, however, still need to become further engaged, so that people with disabilities can fully benefit from the notion that social enterprises build marketable and transferable employment skills while providing a viable resource that fully integrates people with disabilities within their community.

In 1999, Allies, in congruence with their mission, began to develop social enterprises with support and guidance from the New Jersey Division of Developmental Disabilities. Both entities determined that the prevailing sheltered workshop and congregate "crew labor" models of supported employment were misaligned with community-based supports and realized that there must be a better way to build employment and social capital skills for their customers, while maintaining a commitment of service provision and fiscal responsibility to state and federal funders.

Two community-based storefront businesses were developed on main streets in two New Jersey towns. The term social enterprise was but a whisper at a conference a few states away; Allies, following their founding values, was miles ahead. Both community-based storefront businesses, developed as a means to improve engagement of people with disabilities in more meaningful employment roles, evolved into a mission of social capital and the best prevailing technologies in supported employment. Before we knew it, we were a thriving social enterprise.

Allies continues to employ people with disabilities while bringing their community into the fold, having identified unique avenues in which green initiatives can be incorporated into recognized, supported employment and social capital models. Allies' Greensleeves in Flemington and Mount Holly provide the opportunity for people with

disabilities to garner vital, transferable job skills while engaging and educating the community at large in the burgeoning movement towards green initiatives and future sustainability. Such concerns remain at the forefront for all of us, as the social conscience focuses on the future of our planet. People with disabilities seize the opportunity to develop their employment skills, while educating the community at large about contemporary concerns such as the generation of pollution and waste, the ongoing energy crisis, and what we can do as a community to find solutions.

Greensleeves, built on the concept that fabric can be recycled and reused and that gently used, upscale clothing can be resold, opened up the world for people with disabilities looking for ways in which they could hone their employment skills, while overcoming barriers to community inclusion.

Four community-based storefront businesses, built upon the Greensleeves model, are thriving in four New Jersey towns. Greensleeves is a household name in Somerville, Mount Holly, Flemington and Barnegat. The notion of providing "safe" employment settings for people with disabilities has indeed been laid to rest. Allies' has achieved success in fully engaging people with the most significant physical, cognitive, and behavioral difficulties in the most integrated and inclusive community settings. Greensleeves Flemington operates on Church Street as part of an established and well-known outlet village;

Greensleeves Somerville operates on Main Street among well-known restaurants and art galleries; Greensleeves Mount Holly operates on High Street in the county seat; and Greensleeves Barnegat operates within a busy shopping center on Main Street.

The Greensleeves model continues to allow for growth and new development as our industry and communities improve collaboration. Conceived as a model for repurposing and renewing fabric and clothing, Greensleeves has expanded to providing unique and repurposed home décor, upcycled event favors, original art by people with disabilities, handmade greetings cards, natural beauty products, and farm-to-table cuisine and baked goods made from produce in our community gardens.

Greensleeves employees gain a unique knowledge of environmental initiatives while building marketable and transferable employment skills; communities at large gain insight into the capabilities of our employees through natural and spontaneous interactions as customers in a venue that has become a fixture in their community. The assumption that people with disabilities function on a lower level and are reliant upon the community begins to fade as Greensleeves employees educate their retail customers in environmental stewardship.

Allies will continue to persevere as a leader in the continued growth of social enterprises. The changing face

of supported employment in New Jersey is such that the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, the New Jersey Department of Labor, and the New Jersey Division of Developmental Disabilities have determined that the traditional 5 hour per day, 5 day per week habilitation model does not adequately meet the needs of people with disabilities. Within the Greensleeves model, prevocational training, community-based supports, community inclusion, supported employment, career planning, and transportation replace the traditional 5-hour, 5-day offering. People with disabilities now have the opportunity to direct the course of their day, and access the services that they will actually use.

Provider agencies and community partners rely on each other for resource and information sharing. Allies serves as a member of the Association for the Betterment of Citizens with Disabilities (ABCD), and has the opportunity to share the latest innovations for social enterprises with 51 other provider agencies. Additionally, Allies continues to collaborate with its five affiliate partners, the New Jersey Division of Developmental Disabilities, the New Jersey Department of Children and Families, Mercer County Community College, Bristol Myers Squibb, the Peter and Lucia Buck Foundation, and various local school districts.

About the author

Elise Tretola is the President and CEO of Allies. Elise

began in social services as a Program Development Specialist, developing housing for people with disabilities. This meaningful experience ignited her passion for the field and led her to Allies where she says she is grateful to have the opportunity to fulfill her life's mission to help people realize their dreams. Nothing is more important to Elise than developing individualized supports for people that promote their independence with dignity, respect and understanding.

Elise brings a unique perspective to Allies, having first started as a small business owner. She owned a Homemade Pasta & Catering Company for many years, where she gained experience in all aspects of business management—knowledge that is proving valuable running such a large and diverse organization that serves over 1,700 people with disabilities. Promoting positive customer relations is another important lesson Elise took from her business. At Allies, she takes great pride in ensuring her staff works one on one with families to design comprehensive assistance plans that are as unique as the people they support.

In addition to her professional accomplishments, Elise is very active in her community. She is a past Rotarian and recipient of the Paul Harris Award for the Hamilton/Washington Rotary, and was honored as Woman of the Year by Women Helping Women in

2009. Most recently, Elise was inducted into the New Jersey Women's Hall of Fame by the Trenton YWCA.