



MomsFightingAutism.com

Van Hatchell



Van Hatchell is the Managing Director of Extraordinary Ventures, Inc a nonprofit in Chapel Hill, NC with the mission of creating small businesses for the sake of employing adults with developmental disabilities. In his time there he has grown 3 businesses to be sustainable employers, created the team of social entrepreneurs who manage the businesses and worked closely with Autism Speaks to identify the 14 promising practices of small business employment across the country.

Social Entrepreneurism in the Community

How a group of parents were able to tap social entrepreneurs to create an organization to employ 40 individuals with developmental disabilities.

Start of transcripts.

Chantal: Right now we have a wonderful person here that I'm really excited to have on. His name is Van Hatchell, and he's going to be speaking about social entrepreneurism in the community. Now you remember earlier, if you were here listening to my keynote, I talked about how today's solutions for employment and finding ways to have our loved ones have fulfilling lives was going to be about not just finding things that are already out there, but helping with other people to create solutions and opportunities that can be really exciting for our loved ones on the spectrum.

Van Hatchell is the managing director of Extraordinary Ventures, which is a nonprofit in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. And the mission of Extraordinary Ventures has the mission of creating small businesses for the sake of employing adults with developmental disabilities.

In his time there, he has grown three businesses to be sustainable employers, created a team of social entrepreneurs who manage the businesses, and works closely with Autism Speaks to identify the 14 promising practices of small business employment across the country. And so his topic about social entrepreneurs in the community is how a group of parents were able to tap social entrepreneurs to create an organization to employ 40 individuals with developmental disabilities. Welcome, Van.

Van: Thank you, Chantal, I really appreciate Moms Fighting Autism asking us to be a part of the conference. I'm really happy to share our story with the listeners, and that it would generate some really good questions and might inspire some of our listeners to potentially think about starting businesses to employ their loved ones.

Before I get started with my slide presentation, I do want listeners to watch our video; the About Us video that it is on our website. I believe that it's photo slides, so I want to time it with my computer, too, so I'm going to hit play now, and then I'll start in my slides after the video.

Chantal: Right, so those who are watching online, the slide, the video is actually 4 minutes and 45 seconds. I'm going to watch it, too.

Van: Great, so I think now everyone should be finished with video in about five minutes. Hopefully, that gave you a pretty good idea of the general direction of our organization. And now I want to take a bit of a deeper dive with these slides to see if you guys can get a better understanding of who we are, and then hopefully, through hearing our story, it'll generate some pretty good Q&A after the slides.

So first, obviously, the title of the presentation is "Creating Jobs in the Community: A Story of Social Entrepreneurism in the Community." So if you take anything away from these slides, it's that we are a real business, we employ 40 individuals on the spectrum, and that we're a replicable model. Those are the takeaways of who we are.

So what's unique about our organization? The first is that we're a portfolio of small businesses; we don't rely just on any one business to create our employment. We serve the full spectrum of disabilities, and we're managed by a

team of young social entrepreneurs, and that our businesses are created around the strengths and skills and interests of the individuals that we employ.

So let's take a step back. Obviously, everyone on the slide is an expert in this. When an individual has autism, phases out of the school system, whatever age that might be, depending on your state. Here, it's 22 in North Carolina, and it really, services just disappear.

The schools do a really good job of, in our area especially, of filling a person's day with meaning, structure and growth. But once they phase out of school system, the services really just disappear. Across the country, the situation, the different states, when they phase out the school system, it's much the same.

So speaking from our viewpoint of the next 10 years, that it's estimated now that 500,000 individuals with autism spectrum disorder alone will phase out of the school system. That's some staggering numbers. Here we can call it a crisis, because a crisis isn't that it's going to happen, the crisis is how we're going to meet the need, because needs need to be met.

So what do families do when they get phased out of the school system? Speaking from the families that are employed at Extraordinary Ventures now, many of them talk about the days that they instantly started scrabbling for the limited services that were there in our community. And they faced a job market with few opportunities, and a lot of misconceptions that prevented them from finding any type of paid employment. And to be honest, many of them gave up.

Chantal: Van?

Van: Yeah?

Chantal: Are you able to see the slides moving, because somebody just wrote in to say that they don't see the slides advancing. Is it advancing?

Van: Oh. They work for me, I can re-click on the link and see what happens.

Chantal: Maybe I should just tell people to refresh their screen?

Van: Let's see, does that . . .

Chantal: Oh, here . . .

Van: . . . fix it?

Chantal: . . . now it is. I would suggest that individuals who say that the slides are not advancing, to refresh their screen, because perhaps with watching the video, you weren't able to see the screen advancing, or the slides advancing. Sorry about that. So everyone just refresh your screens because the slides are moving. I can see them.

Van: Okay, great.

Well, jumping back in, really felt like out of that need in the community, that a portfolio approach would be a really neat solution for employing this population in our community. Eventually, we were started by parents. Most parents banded together and looked, and there were organizations that were doing training, there were organizations that were covering transition, and there were organizations that were doing some type of supportive employment job coaching.

But really, with all that was going on, there wasn't a whole lot of opportunity there, so they set out to create an organization to employ their kids. I mentioned earlier that that unique approach, the first piece that's unique is that we have multiple small businesses [Inaudible 00:08:04] for our employment. We really feel like that's essential and gives us three forms of diversification; one is that, you know, consider the market environment changes in our employment, the business that some of our employers begins to decline.

You know, we can then shift our resources and our employees into another business and their hours are more secure. That diversification and option actually gives us the ability to place more individuals. Say, you know, your son or daughter lives in our area and comes to us, we have an opening in one or two of our businesses. Maybe they don't like making candles, but they really enjoy the structured task of folding laundry. Well then, if we were a typical employer, we would say, "Sorry, we couldn't employ you." The first business you approach [inaudible 00:08:54] gifts, but because we see their interest in skill, we can then post you into a different business. And then lastly, it gives us options.

It gives us options for employees who, you know, work in the businesses for a few years and then decide that, you know, their interests have changed, or they want to grow in a different area. So we really like that balanced approach, and that portfolio approach, gives us a really unique strength of an employment model. So many jobs are overwhelming for the population; that's very typical, whether it be the soft skills that it takes to navigate an employment setting, or it's anytime of stimulus in the work environment that could be unnoticed by the other coworkers. Really, there's a lot about the job market there was

overwhelming that we wanted to be able to make comfortable for our employees.

And so how we did that is with the other . . . one of those unique features of our model, is that we really fit the jobs around the people. And what I mean by this is that we aren't job carving, we aren't taking the business that's existing and then finding a place that, you know, someone could come in and work, but it's really not part of the full value proposition of the business. We look at our employees and then segment them based on their skills and interests. So for instance, with our candle business, we started that business because we had a few employees that really liked to cook, or people that said they like to cook. Maybe not so good at it, but wanted to pursue something like that.

Well we created the candle business because it follows a recipe process; it was a business they would thrive in because of their interest in that. Same with our laundry business; our laundry business was created because we had one employee who really liked to ride around town and go in and out of buildings and meet people. We had another employee who, at home, would take clothes off of his shelf that have been neatly folded already, just the fold them again. And we actually had a few employees that really liked watching the machines operate; they really enjoyed that process. So out of that, those combinations of segmenting those employees' skills, we created businesses, really, that they could excel in. That we could leverage their abilities into something that was going to work locally.

So here's a sample of the tasks that we have in two of our businesses - the first is our bus crew. Vacuuming floors, cleaning our suites, washing windows, and supervisory duties; so [inaudible 00:11:45] these types of tasks are, they're very simple. You know, it's not rocket science. They can be communicated visually on a task list, and the start and finish can be communicated visually, and it can be replicated in a to- do list really easily. And then lastly, the supervisor duties, we actually have individuals on the spectrum supervising the team that details the interior of the buses on our bus crew. So we actually have worked in the opportunity for promotion and skill advancement and career development into this business.

Same thing here with the laundry business. Again, we sort and inventory close, we operate machines, we fold and pack, and then pick up and deliver. Like I said earlier, it's not rocket science, and they're all tasks that can be structured very nicely for someone who really needs that picture schedule or visual schedule, with clear starts and stops and clear expectations.

And with that approach of creating the businesses around the skills and interests of our employees, we didn't actually start our organization going down that path when we first tried to create employment. We didn't have a lot of growth during that time, but since we changed, our businesses have been able to grow in employment by 50% each year since 2010. That employment is actually a number of employees that we have here, and the amount of employment that we offer to our employees.

So we really do believe that's a key way to succeed at creating business, is to employ the population - designing around their skills and interests. But beyond the numbers, the real payoff, honestly, is the satisfaction and growth that our employees experience while they have a job at the competitive employment, the sense of belonging they have when they're part of something bigger than themselves, and the fact that they're a part of a team. You know, whether they can communicate it to you verbally or not or with an iPad or some type of intermediary, really, our guys enjoy being a part of something.

They also really understand when they're creating value. All of our businesses, the jobs that we have, directly impact the customer. Our employees totally get what they're doing provides a value to somebody. And it really gives them a lot of confidence when they know that they are contributing.

Then lastly, the paycheck is big for our employees. You know, most of them, this is their first paying job, and that is something that paychecks, that ability to tell people that they get paid for what they do, is something that is really a value to them. A lot of them use their money to help pay utilities for their living situation, or use their money to start relationships with individuals in the community. So it's really is an asset to them moving forward and growing.

So to sort of speak about what we've learned along the way, because you know, we certainly don't feel like we're experts and we don't have the only answer, we feel like we have a pretty decent answer for our community. You know, the lessons that we've learned is that you're going to have to get started; you know, it took us about a year and a half, two years, before we decided to actually start a business. In concept form for two years, you don't create a whole lot of employment when you're just thinking about what you're going to do.

So get started--it's a big hurdle. Two is accepting trial and error is something that is a mantra for our organization, because one, you know, without failure you're not going to know what's going to work for your customers. Without trial and error and failing and learning, you're not going to know what's going to work for your employees.

But on the far side of that failure comes the success. Every win grows on itself and compounds to create a thriving work environment, a sustainable work environment. The third lesson that we've learned is you really have to focus in your local markets and pick the low hanging fruit. You know, our laundry business works really well because we serve mainly students in our university.

We're located in the same town as the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill, and they're our primary customers. You may not have a college town, so our business, that laundry business might not work for you. But every community has its own opportunities, so just go and try to find that low hanging fruit that's going to be of interest to the employees.

And then lastly, you've got to treat it like it's a real business. And this is something that we really feel separates a sustainable work environment from an environment that is only short-term and could potentially be training. You treat it like a real business when you grow the business based on real profit margin, you have a really good idea of how to communicate, tasking your employees, clock in and clock out, it's done sustainably - you're going to create an environment that could stand the test of time. That's how it becomes a real business when you treat it that way. And then lastly, you know, I just want to review our organization's goals. First and foremost, we just want to provide the best meaningful employment that we can to our community.

You know, this will always be our long-term and immediate goal. But second, because we feel like we've sort of cracked the code in our local area on how to something like this, we really do want to inspire and motivate through sharing our story. And that lastly transitions into being a model. You know, we certainly don't feel like we have the only answer, but we do think we have an answer that could work. Our approach could work in many communities across the country to create employment for this population. And so with that, hopefully it gives you a really good idea of what we do and hopefully could inspire you to potentially think about creating an employment environment for your local [inaudible 00:18:20] community.

But with that, let's get into some questions. I think generally, we stimulate a lot of Q&A because we're such a unique model and have been through a lot of failure to get to where we are now.

Chantal: Yes, so there are some questions out here, but I have a bunch of questions first, if that's okay?

Van: Yeah, sure.

Chantal: So the first thing I want to know is, how did this company get started? Because my impression was that it wasn't just, you know, voc rehab or an organization like that. Was it parents that started this or parents with a bunch of college graduates? Or where did the idea of this come from?

Van: Certainly. So our organization really did come out of the community banding together to meet the need. And what I mean by that is, really, parents had moved to our area for the U.N.C TEACH center when their children were diagnosed with autism in the early '90s, and so they had banded together and really fought for everything their kids got in the community as they grew to each phase.

And when they approached adulthood, then they noticed that there were not a lot of opportunities, and so they wanted to create an organization like this. So what we did--or what they did--is they found a building, they put some money into it, and they hired, we hired a team of young entrepreneurs to set the business up, and that's what we talked about in our video in our unique factor.

So one of the business ideas, the laundry business, was brought with the organization when it first started. Two of the parents thought that [I'd] be really good employers for their individuals, their kids, and it could really scale in the community. The rest of the businesses we came up with, the team entrepreneurs came up with as we segment those employees as I mentioned earlier, figured out what they liked, and then looked at could we create businesses that will be sustainable in our local community. So it was really a bit of a grassroots effort, parents coming together to solve a problem and tapping some young energy to move forward with it.

Chantal: That's great, and what I loved, also, when I looked at, you know, when you were showing your slide about lessons learned, it's actually everything about treating it like a business. And that's exactly what I say . . . what I'm talking about when you're preparing . . . What I'm talking about in my keynote about preparing students for life after school.

Van: Mm-hmm.

Chantal: Is what [inaudible 00:20:58] wants to do and what are the skills they need, you know, that they can actually function out in the community? And you have to treat looking for work as a business. What are the employer needs? What are they looking for, and how does that relate to the individuals that we have? And you really focus on what is it the person likes to do, or can he do? And that whole team approach is really great because not everyone can do every single aspect of a job, and I think that by . . .

Van: Yeah.

Chantal: . . . working together it creates the idea that they're all a team, and so if one of them has a success, it's a success for the whole team. And they have friendship that way.

Van: Very true, and I think, too, that oftentimes when it comes to thinking of employment settings for people with autism, it's, "Okay, what's out there? What could we adapt them to do in the community?" And also, I think, you know, when the typical guidance counselor asks a kid, "Well what do you want to do when you grow up?" Okay, you answer and you pursue that path, and that's really what this type of approach was.

You know, what would our employees enjoy doing? Maybe if we created businesses that they would like, they would want to be a part of, and then things would jell better. And they have. You know, some of our employees have behaviors at home, but we see very few behaviors in our work environment because they really enjoy what they do.

Because we set them up based on the strengths and interest of the segments, you know, our boarding process is really quick, and we honestly don't see the lot of employee turnover. So you know, that approach, really, I think has made things really nice and easily manageable for us.

Chantal: Can you remind me how long you've been running this company, or that this company's been in existence?

Van: Yeah, so we were founded in 2007 by those parents. In the first two years, we really struggled to find our footing, and then we pivoted the organization in 2010 and 2011 during that time, and that's when [inaudible 00:23:12] we actually took on this approach of creating businesses around individuals, hiring a team of young entrepreneurs to get the thing running. So it's been a really good ride and we've seen a lot of growth in the past two or three years.

Chantal: Great, okay I'm going to start taking some questions that are coming in now. And I want to remind people they can either ask a question by writing into the little chat box there, or I think if you're on the phone and you're looking online, there's a little place where you can click to raise your hands.

But there is a question here from Kathleen [Tarani]. Hi, Kathleen, it's Chantal in Orlando, Florida. She says, "Your program sounds wonderful. You mentioned that it is replicable. Do you have any current relationships established that would allow this program model to begin in any other states? If so, which states, and

how can individuals and families facilitate implementation of this program in their area? What can they do to help speed things up? Great work."

Okay, so one at a time. Do have current relationships established that would allow this program model to begin in other states?

Van: You know, we're actually trying to develop that right now, where we could turnkey franchise our organization in other areas. You know, we see that being a few-year process, to figure it out, how best it could be managed, but what's the best practice for us to do that. Obviously, like I said earlier, embracing trial and error in our organization. And then around taking a look at what, after those one or two, a few years getting into the replications happen, then saying, "Okay, how can we package this to make it scale? How do we scale it to the community that would want it?"

So right now we have some preliminary relationships going with different places in the country that are thinking about helping us learn how to franchise, but nothing going yet. You could see a lot happening with us in the next few years, actually a few months, along this regard.

When it comes to deliverables, we're happy to share our story. And, really, what I mean by replicable is that you can take our concept and do this in your community. You know, for instance, you don't have to have the whole organization that you're looking at today to start. For instance, when our candle business started, it was started in a kitchen; you know, we started making in baskets of eight and we sold those in front of the local grocery stores. And after you have that win, and you take it and you try to sell it online. After you figure that out, you take it and you try to sell it to mom-and-pop retailers.

And then you have that win, you then take it to bigger partners who are going to be able to create some volume for the business. But all that doesn't just happen at once; it takes a few years to get going in the process.

Chantal: It's important. I really like the fact that you realize that people like cooking and they liked recipes, and candles are a recipe process. Because one important thing about being able to make candles instead of food is, first of all, candles are nonperishable. And also . . .

Van: Yeah.

Chantal: . . . in a lot of space, if you want to make food that you're going to sell somewhere, there's a whole licensing, and you have to do in an approved

kitchen, and all this kind of stuff. But when you're working with candles, you don't have that kind of challenge, do you?

Van: No, no you don't. And you know, even with our laundry business, you say that there's, you could see in a dreadful market for our laundry business, you don't have to go out and buy a laundromat to start our business. Our business, you know, for the first year only had 10 or 12 customers. We had a facility because of all of our other businesses already going when we started that, with the laundry business. But you could feasibly start servicing 10, 12 customers out of a basement somewhere or out of your living room using your own machine.

Building up demand for the product, and then once you have the point where you would need to grow out of your smaller setting, then go look for a place, a shop that would need to be, you know, the rent and a lease to be paid. The concept of starting small, though, is something that we've always tried to do first, and you can have a whole lot of critical mass that has to happen before that can be sustainable. It's really difficult unless you have a lot of cash, a lot of management, and a lot of experience. So lower those barriers by thinking, "How can I do this that's going to be valuable to the customer and do it the simplest and the cheapest way possible?"

Chantal: So we talked about selling online, you don't necessarily have to set up the whole, big website, but you could actually use existing websites that are there to help market for you, correct?

Van: Yeah, exactly. When we first started out our website we used a Google checkout feature, which, you create a Google Excel spreadsheet, and then it populates the whole store for you and handles all the process. We actually discontinued using the service now, but things like Shopify do it for you very quickly. Etsy, if you've ever heard of that store, it works very quickly.

Chantal: Yes.

Van: And then if you have a really substantial product, you can even get on things like Amazon.com and have access to their buyers.

Chantal: Right. I did want to mention, because I do have some calls coming in on line here. Here's the instruction, if you're on the phone, you can just hit *2, and I can see on my computer who has a question. So just sit tight, though, 'cause there are other questions as well, but if you are on the phone and you have a question, you can hit *2 on your phone.

All right, so here's the question from Regina Del Oro in Manhattan Beach, California, "How do they go about funding E.V.? Did they tap public resources or

did they raise money to start it, and how viable is it financially?" So the first question, how did you go about funding E.V.?

Van: So when E.V. started, the parents that started the organization banded together to create the initial seed money. And I know that sounds somewhat daunting, but we try to explain it to people that in general, and a lot of times families look to pay for their kid's college education. And if your kid isn't going to go to college, EV, when we started, the commitment was pitched as pay half the tuition for your kid as part of starting this organization that's going to really be...you know, you go to college, you get a job, usually afterwards, after you experience of growth.

Well, if you were not going to go to college as the vehicle to be able to make yourself employable, well then maybe this is the way that you should think about investing in your child's future employment. So it was all private money that started the organization, and the dream was always that we would be sustainable. So sustainable meant that, you know, we would be able to cover our costs with the revenues from the businesses and not be [inaudible 00:30:52] dependent on donations to keep the organization going. But any nonprofit, excuse me, any organization in a startup phase goes through what's is called a [J curve]; you've got to spend money first before you can make money to make things sustainable.

So we're at a place now where our organization, I think, could turn for a profit if we wanted to, but if we did that, we really see our donations that come into our organization every year as a way to enrich the jobs and the lives of our employees and to start new employment. So we started with one business, and as that business became profitable, [inaudible 00:31:37] profitable as in us handling profits, that'll spill over the profits from that into the next business with an annual fund. And as it goes and comes to a place with financial sustainability, spill whatever it makes over into the next business. So you run the organization to invest in a net zero funding type of situation, but you're creating an employment with every success that you have.

Chantal: Yeah, I mean it's kind of like businesses, a lots of times when they make money they turn around and put it back into their [inaudible 00:32:08] to improve or add new products. And so what you're saying is that that donation is more like seed money to try other things, to get other things started; it's not to dump it back into the cost to keep going the other ventures. Is that correct?

Van: Exactly, yeah, exactly. All of our businesses cover their costs. Many of our businesses help grow some of our younger businesses as they go through the scale point in business development. And we're at a place now where we're thinking about starting another business here at the end of the summer,

beginning of the fall, because of the success of the other businesses that we've got going right now.

Chantal: Okay. So I had a couple of people who had written in with questions about that and I think I've answered, or you've answered them. Now we have Vinnie in Sunnyvale. "Do you know of a similar kind of business in the Bay Area?" That's San Francisco Bay area. "Did you ever approach CEOs of big companies to see if they would be part of something like this?" So first of all . . .

Van: Hmm.

Chantal: . . . do you know of a similar kind of business in the San Francisco area?

Van: In San Francisco, the only business that I know of right now is, there's a group called the Specialists Guild. They are trained . . .

Chantal: Can you . . .

Van: . . . individuals.

Chantal: . . . repeat?

Van: It's called the Specialists Guild.

Chantal: Okay.

Van: They're a group that just started, I believe, about a year and half ago, and they're training individuals on software testing, and then placing them in businesses in the Bay Area. They've been pretty successful to my knowledge when I last [inaudible 00:34:01] which was last fall, placing two employees, because they just started, so two [inaudible 00:34:09], and they wanted to grow and scale what they were doing in the Bay Area. That's the only business I know of now, but I'm sure that they'll be a lot of growth going on in the area in the next few years as it gets to be becoming more and more mainstream. And there might be some that I don't know of. The second question was, "Have we approached any CEOs with this?"

You know, we haven't gone out and done advocacy work in meeting face-to-face with somebody who is thinking about starting a business. But what we have done is taken the concept of employing individuals with autism and other development disabilities on a small business model and taking that around the country and trying to express the people that you can create a business that will be perfect for your sons or daughters or individuals. So instead of going to the

top, we're thinking that it needs to be grassroots in the community, and that's typically how the small businesses of America started.

You know, the guy next door to find some success over some time and finds himself on top of managing a business. There are certainly big corporations that are employing the population that are doing a really good job out there, and we need that. We've just been championing the small business model as a great employment opportunity to solve the crisis that we're talking about with the slide show.

Chantal: Right. So this morning in my keynote, I was talking about the importance of mentors, when people are in school, to help figure out interests that a student has and how that it could blossom to be a [inaudible 00:36:06] or a way to make money. And so I like this whole idea of the grassroots, and if there are parts of a thing that you don't know, like you said, it's not necessarily having to go see the CEO of the company. But you might know someone in your community who, like for example, the whole candle-making thing; maybe you know somebody who makes candles, so they can come and help you out and give you a lot of information that you're not going to waste time or money on.

So it's all about finding people in the community, and you'll be surprised, I think, when you ask for information, when it's something people are passionate about themselves, they're more than happy to help. Because again, we're not asking for handouts, we're asking for information that's going to help us help people be more successful in what they're doing.

Van: Yeah, I would agree completely. All of our businesses have had guidance from either a full profit counterpart, or somebody in the full profit world that's a piece of a business that we're doing. So we have an event center in our organization, and we have the caterer with a decorator, someone from Visitors Bureau. You know, all people that have been mentors to us and helping us guide the business to growth and helping us overcome obstacles that we've never seen before. But you know, they are certainly very willing to help because through our success, they get success and their business grows as well.

Chantal: Yes, so the Small Business Association, they have SCORE, which is the Service Corps of Retired Executives. And have you used them?

Van: We haven't, we haven't, we've just gone out and networked the community based on the extended network of the parents that founded the organization, and then based on knocking doors. We tapped our local Chamber of Commerce; they've been very helpful . . .

Chantal: It's a . . .

Van: . . . with us.

Chantal: . . . really good place to start. I would suggest people out there who are sending questions about how do you get started to how you get information is . . . I'm not a business person. And before I got my first book published, I had quit my job because I couldn't leave my house to go to a regular job to do my production work anymore so I thought, "Okay, maybe I can write. How do I do writing as a business?" I went to SCORE and found out, for free, all these kinds of things about setting up my own business. And they have some inexpensive webinars, but they also have some free information, but you can meet with people for free.

And so then when Jeremy started in some different self-employment things, and also people in the community here in San Diego, we put on a few self-employment workshops, and we tapped into SCORE. Again, they're retired executives, and for free, they come and help you. And it's great because these are people that have a ton of experience and they're sharing with you their knowledge. There's no use to reinvent the wheel if you can tap into people. So if you don't know anybody personally who could help you, check it out because they're in all cities. SCORE, S-C- O-R-E.

And if you're in a remote place, they do have webinars online as well. And also the Chamber of Commerce, just like Van mentioned, did really . . . I know here in San Diego, they've been very helpful, too, for people trying to earn a living.

So let's see, here's Sharon from Boise. She says, "Are there any grants out there that will help create and support a business with disabilities? If so, where would you recommend to begin?"

Van: Hmm. You know, [when we] [inaudible 00:39:47] Autism Speaks adult services team looking across the country as a small business employer, that it was amazing how people were able to braid and twist different types of revenue streams early on to be their seed money. And I knew of some individuals that have used [V.R.] to start using . . . to do self-employment and microbusinesses.

I've seen people that have . . . actually it was another organization - they actually tap [TARP's] money, economic stimulus money to start a business to employ individuals with disabilities. I've seen local colleges and community colleges extend seed grants to people that go through an incubator or entrepreneurship seminar type classes.

And I've even seen some towns give money to take a group and employ the population in that town. So it's really about figuring out and researching the local area to see what opportunities are available, because all these things change from state to state and community to community. But it's certainly out there, and I've seen people that have been successful doing it.

Chantal: That's very good, and I know people are asking me about specific areas, and I know that you don't know everything, Van, but I'm just going to bring them up because perhaps you have heard from people or you have contacts in these areas. Joyce Davenport from Portland asks, "Have you heard of this being offered in the state of Oregon?"

Van: I'm pretty sure most vocational rehab programs have some form of micro-enterprise evaluation that could potentially give people money to start up. I'm not positive. I'm not sure, but I'm pretty sure that's something that they're all trying to rollout, but don't quote me. Actually, I don't know enough of every state.

Chantal: What about your type of organizations? Do you know of people starting any in Portland, Oregon, or in any other areas of Oregon? And [inaudible 00:42:03] . . .

Van: In Oregon?

Chantal: . . . out of Sherman Oaks in Los Angeles. Sandy from Sherman Oaks wants to know, "If you've heard of an E.V. type of organization in L.A.?"

Van: Hmm. Yeah, well in L.A. I know that it's not exactly like us, but Inclusion Films does a really good job of training individuals on how to be a member of the film industry. And they've actually had one or two individuals go off and start their own micro media company. So Inclusion Films to be a good place in L.A. In Oregon, I'm honestly not sure. I'm sorry to say, I wish I could answer. If they find of anything, I would love . . .

Chantal: No, I . . .

Van: . . . to know, just 'cause I'd like to network with them.

Chantal: Yeah, I've heard of different organizations such as Inclusion Films. And also later on today, this afternoon, we're having Art History Studios, which is in the Bay Area, but that specifically for creating, and it's based on art or creating things. And so again, based on the interests of the student/worker, because it started as an afterschool program and went on to become, now, employment. So I guess E.V. is the first one that I've heard of that are actually creating separate

little, or small, businesses. But the fact, if you connect with other ones that, like for example, in LA, Inclusion Films, they might be able to hook you up with other parents who have the same thoughts to create something else. I mean, people with the same ideas tend to migrate together, so . . .

Van: Yeah.

Chantal: . . . it might be an idea to do that. For example, with Jeremy and his interests and arts, just because of networking in the autism community, but also in the special needs community, and also in the local our community, I've sort of found a couple of people who are professionals who are saying, "You know, I've always wanted to start a workshop," not a workshop - workshop's not the right word, "a work studio, you know, we're all kinds of arts can take place. And they eventually can be into a vocation." So there are a couple of different professionals, but all creative arts and thinking, "Well, why don't we get a spot together?"

And parents will say, "Well, I have a kid with an interest." So it's a little different than what E.V.'s doing, but the point is having these different types of options is really wonderful. What I like about the E.V. is that it does . . . there are so many different types of businesses you can put in there.

Van: It certainly is, and you know, I don't have a slide on this, but I would it will probably be great to talk little bit about some of the challenges that we met along the way while we were trying to grow each one of our businesses, that don't have to do with seed money.

Chantal: Can you take some of the time to do that now? I'm sure the listeners would love to hear that.

Van: Yeah, so the big one that we found that was a huge hurdle for us was sales. You know, sales of the lifeline of a business, and in our experience, we wanted to sit down and figure out how to do everything, how to structure it for the population. And then we have really good-looking structures, but no customers with orders to then fill those structures.

So when we pivoted, we actually did start to go out and sell products before we actually had them. We had an idea of how we would create each sale. We had an idea behind how we were going to grow the business and structure going forward. But we really focused on bringing in the customers first, and growing the business and the value in the structures after them.

There's some seasonality that goes into all business; that's something you have to think about, too, when you're going to try and employ the population that

likes to have consistency, very standard schedule, and those types of things is that, if for instance, our laundry businesses you really tied to the University here in town. So when the students leave in the summer, a lot of our employment drops.

Where our candles business really takes off in the fourth quarter during the holiday season, October through December. But the rest part of the year is significantly slower than that.

That was something that you were going to have to think about when you're trying to fill consistent employment. And another piece of the seasonality is, especially if you don't have a lot of money to start off, is year-end cash flow. Not every business, like our gift business, for instance, makes most of its money during October, November, and December.

So we get a lot of cash then that we have to then budget and preserve for the rest of the year going forward. So if I was to start a gift business, I would start networking and trying to make sales very end of the summer, early fall, and then hope to build the business as the orders came in, and then use that cash to then preserve the business with the next year.

Another thing that was a challenge for us was structures for our employees. You know, you were to come to E.V. you would see some pretty obvious symptoms, and you would find some pretty not obvious symptoms of disabilities or disorders. But when you're trying to structure a business, you can't have a different type of structure and support system for each individual, which is . . . that's the mantra, right? If you met one person with autism, you've met one person with autism. We have to create a structured that's going to work for most everyone.

The method that works for us--it took a long time to get there-- is, we did the most communicative structure possible that would work for anyone, and then we would then take their structure and modify it based on each individual.

So we have 17 employees in our laundry business. Instead of having 17 different structures, that each person, having one common denominator for all of them, then letting each individual have their own modifications around the structure. That was something that took us a very long time to figure out and to make successful for our employees. Those are some of the biggest challenges that we've had. Sales, sales is a big one. Once you've figured out how to sell, things became little bit easier.

Chantal: You know, and sales and marketing are big issues for any kind of business. And I think that nowadays there are a lot more consultants in small businesses; that's a big area I think that a lot of people struggle with. And so it's really important to remember that that part of the business plan, the marketing, is a topic that people spend little time paying attention to, but actually has to have a budget and should be in the business plan.

Van: I completely agree and I . . . You know, speaking of the business plan, when we started each of our businesses at EV, we didn't create a 20-, 30-, 40-page business plan with a huge Excel spreadsheet or anything like that. We really looked at each business and adjust so market. Would it be the ability to grow this market, okay? What kind of position does the market need to be in? Okay, now let's get started. Because often in the business world you can experience the paralysis of analysis, which prevents you from starting, which is learning lesson number one for us was to just get started. You know, oftentimes people spend months or years figuring out a business plan before they jump into it.

Chantal: Right.

Van: Most of the time when you visit your first customer, you take that product and you go to your first customer, they're going to tell you why they don't like it, and often is going to change all of that research you did. Then you can't go back to research more; you've got to iterate on that product and take it to the next customer, and keep iterating on the product until it's going to be purchased multiple times by your target customer. That's how you grow based on experimentation and trial and error. Don't grow based on research and assumptions.

Chantal: Right.

Van: Startups always an organization trying to test assumptions to become sustainable and profitable. So you're really trying to figure out what type of product, what sells, that a business is going to be sustainable.

Chantal: Good point. Here is a question CarolShellyID: "I work in a sheltered workshop," I guess it's from Shelley, Indiana, or is that Idaho? I'm not sure, but anyways, Carol. She says she works in a sheltered workshop and the state is trying to eliminate them, and what can we do or should we do to continue to help people with disabilities?

Van: Hmm. You know, it's an interesting question. I think employment that pays individuals and values the time and their creation is very essential. You know, it was something that was big for us is, we all wanted minimum wage to be bare minimum for someone that works here, and that they would be able to make more as they grew and they became more productive and responsible and valuable to our organization. And I think right now, it's really going to take the concept of what grew America, the entrepreneurship that grew America, to solve the issue of unemployment. Small businesses, I think it was Obama when he ran and said, made of two thirds of the employment in this country.

So if we're going to try to make a really big dent in the 500,000 that's coming, and the many that are already there who don't have jobs, it's going to come to little people compared to big organizations. Little people starting something for their friends and family, which is why we champion the small business model.

I think getting creative and innovating in our local communities is how we're going to come back. You know, the phasing out of old employment models for this type of community, and transition people that have been able to experience the benefit of those. Transition them into the normal community or into another type of employment setting. I really do think it's going to come down to people saying, "You know what? And that's enough. I'm going to do it myself." And bring in the community with them.

Chantal: Right, so Beth in New Jersey has a question. She wants to know, because we're talking about how it was a community grassroots thing of parents getting together and then working with you all. "Are parents still involved in E.V., and to what extent?"

Van: Yeah, so parents are involved at every level of our organization. We have parents of the population on our board, and we have parents that are in the organization daily, either supporting their loved ones, or just coming in giving us new business ideas. We actually have parents out in the community, helping champion the value of the individuals that we employ, and the value of our businesses. Parents are out there pushing the ground to try and encourage others to try think about starting businesses to employ their loved ones. So really, parents have started us, have taken on many different roles--the roles that they feel comfortable with--but are still are championing our mission and community.

And it's really been something special about this organization is that it was a group of parents that started it.

Chantal: Okay. John, who's in Kansas, wants to know if you have other small businesses in the pipeline, and if so, what those are?

Van: Sure. So we've been looking at potentially doing a cleaning service for hire service office buildings. You know, there's usually a crew that comes in and details and touches up the workspace after it closes after 5:00 p.m. They're not coming in doing deep cleaning or scrubbing or anything like that, but they're just keeping the place looking at to the same standards. So it's maintenance every day. We felt like that would be a pretty deep, interesting employer. We've looked into doing a food truck that our employees would be a part of the food delivery process and the food creation process, because we feel like we have enough operational know-how by now to address some of the regulations around food.

We've also looked into growing our office solutions business into being more than just a direct mail service. Growing it into being an advertising service, where we would, as part of our product, ship out advertisements for local businesses to the community. And we've actually, because land is abundant down here, we've actually talked about thinking about how a driving range for golf would be a decent employer for this population.

So we have a few ideas; some are certainly just dreams, but we really do think we're going to be, especially the maintenance, the facility maintenance, the facility cleaning business, we've been kicking that around for two or three years. We think we are probably going to to start it soon.

Chantal: Can I ask you how many staff members, I mean, administration type people, like, for example, yourself, are employed by E.V.?

Van: So there's a team of five of us, and that's just been the five this past year. It's been four young entrepreneurs managing the organization since 2010, where we did that pivot. You know, the interesting thing about having individuals that are younger is that what they give up in experience, you get a lot more energy. And really, that's a huge competitive advantage when you're starting a small business.

I also think was interesting about our team of young entrepreneurs is that none of us don't have any direct autism experience until we came E.V. So certainly we had classes and we were in school with individuals that had autism and development disabilities, but we didn't have any [supportive] of employment background or therapy background or anything like that.

We came from business schools and the business community, and we truly wanted to have an impact on this population. What's really unique about that,

which we didn't think of at the time, though, is that we had a competitive ignorance, in that we didn't know what was the typical employment route for the population. So we weren't burdened by, "Oh, you can't do that; that's not how that works. This is how that should work. This is what it should look like. This is how it's look like for many years." Which I think it helped has us very creatively early on, and still today when we started our business.

Chantal: So may I ask you, how do you get involved, and how did you hear about this organization, or what attracted you to it?

Van: Yeah, so I was approached by our board to come on and help grow the organization at a time where we had two businesses going. We had about 10 employees. And by "two," we had one that was sustainable, one had just started, and we only had 10 or 12 employees. And the board pitched it to me as I studied entrepreneurship in school. "You know, you want to be an entrepreneur? Here goes a situation where you can be an entrepreneur. You're not going to have to go into debt or have a whole lot of financial burden on creating the businesses, but you will have to employ our population in a way that is best for them." And to me, it was just the perfect opportunity to learn to start businesses, and have a huge impact in the community while doing it.

I'm the type of person that I have to personally buy into the value of something before I put my sweat and equity into it. And I remember sitting here at E.V. the first week. One of our employees came in, and he at the time was just waiting for us. And he gave this really joyful noise because he knew it was going to be something valuable, and he'd be around us for an hour and a half, two hours that day. And it was very early on in our history, and we do a lot more than that now, but I remember thinking to myself, "I can do this." And that, to me, was something that was extremely attractive. Really, the chance to learn business and grow a community need was so attractive.

Chantal: Okay. I see your website is up on there. Is that how people can get in touch with you if they wanted someone to come out, I don't know, to speak at a conference or be in their area to talk about how to create the same kind of thing?

Van: It certainly is. Our website, or the website on the screen there, www.evnc.org, or www.extraordinaryadventures.org. There, it has all of our contact information, how to access all of our different business websites. And you know, we certainly like to tell and share our story because we really hope that other people will mimic what we're doing in their community.

Chantal: I just want to remind people that you can still, if you see that little . . . near the slides, you can write in questions. We're still taking questions here.

I don't know if this is a question you can address, but one of the concerns that people have is the whole--and we are having some of speak about SSI and work incentives tomorrow, that's going to be another webinar on this conference--I mean has it been a problem with SSI for people working or, what are the challenges? Has been difficult for your company in working with SSI?

Van: So we really approach the situation as we're the employer. So we don't handle the funding streams for the employees on the back end. But because we obviously want to make it a good solution for their employment, we really try to work with them and get them employed through the level that they want to be.

So we schedule our shifts for each employee based on what will be right and ideal for them. So some of our employees will work four hours a week, some of our employees will work five or six times that in a week. It really just depends on what's right for them, their family, and their situation.

So it's certainly something that has caused families to decide that they don't want more hours of employment. And what that does for our organization is it lets us go and hire another individual, or give more hours to someone else. So we have this sort of natural employment limit that then forces us to go and hire someone else who needs more hours, which is why we try to grow our business pretty sustainably throughout each year.

Chantal: Yeah. Those are good points that you're making there. I also wanted to ask, do you treat . . . So for example, if somebody wants to apply for a job or thinks that they'd be good fit with your organization, do they go through a whole application interview process just like employment? In other words, do they mentor through that, are they given experience of doing that? Do they have regular employee reviews as they would on a regular job? You know, in other words, do they get that full employment experience as they would if they were working at a place perhaps isn't so disability-friendly?

Van: Right. So everyone that applies gets interviewed. So you can apply on our website to be an employee at EV. When you come in for an interview, everyone sits down, has a behavioral interview, that normal question/answer, feedback. And so they get that experience, which is what we interview everyone.

And then we then think that gives us a lot of information about that person's personality, but the real benefit for them is to see the businesses in operation to see where they might be interested in working. So we then take the interviewee on a walking interview throughout our facility and where our other businesses operating, and we let them see a business being worked so they can see the expectations that are going to be there for them.

We ask them to then try those jobs out so we can see what skills they have, and they can really get a feel for what they'll be doing. Based on that, say it's a good fit, we think that person's going to be really valuable for us, and they're going to get a lot out of the work experience. And then we enter into a trial period with them, because sometimes some people don't actually . . . they say they like it or show the ability to do it, but after a few weeks it turns out to not be a good situation. So we want there to be a time limit that both parties can walk away if they wanted to.

And then on the job, our feedback loop is not quite like a normal work environment, where you have to sit down and you have a review of your month or year or quarter. We really try to do that daily, because for so many of our employees, if we told them that three weeks ago, four weeks ago, they were being really slow, that would have quite an impact as it would if you said, "Today, you did a really good job of completing your task, but you're going to need to be able to do that faster because we need to have a certain amount of output."

We try to work with that person daily on achieving those goals. And often any type of case manager, support or parent comes to us and says, "These other goals that this person is working on. Would it be okay if we really pushed that here with your organization?" As long as it doesn't detract from the business and other individual's employment, then we usually are always very supportive of helping give them feedback and the ability to achieve their work-related goals.

Chantal: That's great. I'm going to ask you two share to stories if you don't mind? One is the most challenging the most frustrating situation that you've had with the whole concept at E.V. And then secondly, the best story, the thing that makes you feel the happiest about some example of one person in particular that is an employee of E.V.?

Van: Certainly. So I would say the most frustrating thing that we've had to experience has been something that each business has gone through, and that is when we first went to sell our product, people would line up to buy it. But because we were nonprofit, because our employees were a certain population, they expected it to be really cheap.

Chantal: [Laughing]

Val: That was something that . . .

Chantal: Sorry. [Laughing]

Van: . . . irked me. It absolutely irked me. But what's really good about that, that big frustration, and the long time it took to get us to a place where people didn't have that expectation in our community is that, one, our businesses were able to show that we had pricing power, which is really important when you're trying to create products that people see as valuable. But also, when we climbed out that perception, it meant that the community around us was slowly changing their perception of what the value of somebody that has a development disability or autism can give and what they're worth. And that, to me, has been worth every bit of the fight and frustration that came with that problem.

The best story happened...oh, there are so many. I think one of the best stories happened really recently. So the way that we pay all of our employees is via direct deposit, and we've been struggling with communicating the value of that to our employees by saying, "No, you've been paid, it's there, and you can go access it."

So with one employee in particular we tried this as an experiment - we printed off the paystub. And on a sheet of paper, it said the name, how much they got paid, and deposited in, and we told them--this individual's name is Alex--he goes, "Alex, this is your paycheck. This is the money that you've got that you earned."

His eyes sort of widened and then he turned around--he didn't say anything--he turned around and he walked downstairs to our other level of our building. And there was a group of employees working there, and he raised that sheet of paper above his head and he goes, "I got paid!" And everyone in the room that was there started clapping for him and cheering for him.

And that was a really cool experience for us. Just to see how excited he was that he was paid for what he did. Gosh, it made it all worth it. And everyone else around him knew that they were in that same situation and they were all really happy about it. It was just very rewarding.

Chantal: Yes, I can imagine. But that whole look says it all when you have someone who's realizing that he's earning something; he's earning what he's worth. Exactly the fact that just because you're nonprofit doesn't mean that you aren't supposed to be run like a business.

Van: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm.

Chantal: So that was interesting, also, your challenge area, because that's the problem is that when people think, "Oh, not-for-profit," it means that they don't

have to make money. Not-for-profit it's still have to be run like a business and make money, it's just that the money goes back into the community; it doesn't go back to into the pockets of the people working in the place. But I can imagine that seeing somebody like that, with the look on his face, is more than worth any frustration that you have.

Van: It certainly is, it makes every struggle of being an entrepreneur and starting a business worth it. Knowing that impact is there, and that it's going to happen to need to scale and happen everywhere. It gives me a lot of energy.

Chantal: So I imagine that besides getting paid, have you seen other wonderful aspects--I know you've mentioned some of them in your slides--coming through for these individuals? Such as the rise and self-esteem, and you said a lot of times their inadaptive behaviors went down. Did they learn to communicate together as a team when they needed to on a job, and things like that?

Van: Yes, so we hear stories all the time of employees who this is the first paid job they've had, they really enjoy being part of a team. And the way that plays out and they know that that's happening is a sense of purpose and drive showing up at home. So one of our employees who's pretty impacted, actually has been able to be really self-sufficient in two step processes now at home. He used to be able to tell time and then had regressed, and is now wanting to learn how to tell time again because he wants to know when he's going to get to go to work.

Chantal: Oh.

Van: Being able to lay his clothes out the night before because he knew he was going to go to work the next day. All the things that have sort of poured over into other aspects of his life, mainly because he had the habit, a keystone habit that he really enjoys, and that was coming to work and being a part of a team.

And another area that we've been trying to push forward through is that we started a pilot program to be researched where we did music therapy with our employees. And we're looking to see if it's going to have an effect and spillover into communication on the jobsite. I don't think any research has ever been done like that. We're hoping that we'll be able to show an increase in employee communication through having music therapy done in the work environment and with coworkers.

Chantal: Great. That's so wonderful to hear those stories, because I mean, a lot of times, too, people wonder if their child or their young adult had a job, and they worry about the whole SSI and losing money. And the point is that if you

have a job, money's a part of it, but the other part of it is all the things you just mentioned now.

It's quality of life, and these are ways that people who have jobs improve upon even if, let's say their financial situation may not be that much different, or still is not 100% because of the SSI and all these things that we'll be talking about tomorrow. But sitting at home and getting an SSI check, you're not getting the self-esteem; you're not getting all those things that you just talked about.

Van: Yeah. When we communicate it to the population that doesn't understand the disability world doesn't get a daily reminder of it, we say, look, the meaning behind a job at E.V. is when you introduce yourself to somebody, you say, "Hi, my name's Van, and I manage a social enterprise." You know, our employees are now able to say the name and say what they do in the community. You know, if that's how we define our sense of purpose, our employees are going to get the exact same sense of purpose and drive and identity through having a place of employment.

Chantal: Right. So we have no more questions coming in. And so do you have anything else that you want to share with everyone before we sign off, besides your website? You want to repeat your website for everyone in case they're not looking at the slides?

Van: Sure, so our website, if you want to get in touch with us or learn more about the program, [the shorter URL code is, www.evnc.org. And there you can learn about our organization, how it was founded, much of what we talked about today. And then if you need to get in contact with us because you're kicking around an idea or you have some more questions, feel free to give us a call there.

And I guess my last piece is that replicability piece. You don't have to do exactly what we did, but you certainly can create an employment environment that's very successful, meaningful, and pays your community, your kids, where you're located.

It surely can be done. Many people do it for themselves, and I think it's going to be a big way to change and move the need along employment of the disability population.

Chantal: That's great. Someone else just wrote in, Julia from Andover, saying, "Thank you so much. Truly inspirational."

Van: Well, thank you. I'm glad we can share our story. Feel free to get in touch with me, anyone, if you have any type of an employment type situation that I

don't know about. I would love to learn. I always think that so much to happen through learning from one another when it comes to people with disabilities.

Chantal: Yeah. In fact, I have to say that I met Van Hatchell just a few weeks ago at a national conference in Los Angeles called FRED, which is parents and professionals getting together who are interested in creating future lives based on the individual's wants and needs. And so Van and I were sitting at the same table, so it was just fortuitous because I'm working on Jeremy's self-employment, if you will, and I thought, "Oh my gosh. I'm going to have to get Van on here to speak to everybody."

So thank you so much, Van, for taking the time. Again, it's Van Hatchell from . . . what's the name of your company again?

Van: Extraordinary Ventures.

Chantal: Okay, Extraordinary Ventures, is that it?

Van: Extraordinary Ventures, like . . .

Chantal: Oh . . .

Van: . . . it's . . .

Chantal: . . . Extraordinary . . .

Van: . . . ventures . . .

Chantal: . . . Ventures.

Van: . . . that we start is extraordinary.

Chantal: I had the name of your presentation here, but not your company. Okay, so Van from Extraordinary Ventures. Thank you so much for being here, and thanks for all that you do.

Van: Thank you so much for having me, and I really hope that the community can move forward. It's been really great talking with you today.

Chantal: It was great. Thank you. You really gave people and a lot of hope and information. Thank you so much.

Van: Mm-hmm.

Chantal: Goodbye now.

Van: Bye.