

MAKING A DIFFERENCE

Forty years ago, a group of parents began a non-profit to help children with disabilities. Today, Lafayette Industries is not only still around, it's thriving and making a difference for its employees and the community.

by Julia Paulus Ogilvie
Photos by Bill Sawalich

In 1976, when a group of St. Louis parents found that there was no job placement for their children with disabilities once they were out of high school, they decided to solve the problem.

The solution: They founded Lafayette Industries, a nonprofit organization in Valley Park that provides full-time, long-term jobs in the packaging industry for adults with developmental disabilities.

The organization, which began with 16 employees, quickly outgrew its original facility, reaching the building's capacity by 1982. "That's when they found a suitable building in Manchester, where we are today," says Rob Libera, executive director. "Lafayette was able to make the move with the help of the Productive Living Board [PLB], a taxpayer-funded program. If you own a property in St. Louis County, a tiny percentage of your property tax goes to helping people with disabilities through the PLB."

Today Lafayette employs individuals who are at least 18 years old and have a physical and/or developmental disability. A majority of the employees have completed the Special School District Program. "Long-term and dignified employed is a goal, and 46% of our employees worked at Lafayette for 15 to 30 years," says Libera. "Kenny M., whose parents are among the founders, celebrated his 40th year on Sept. 13, 2016."

The nonprofit continues to expand, operating out of its Manchester facility as well as a new Berkeley location, which was funded through a PLB grant of \$1.4 million and Lafayette's \$2.1 million North County Strong capital campaign. Upon completion, Lafayette Industries North Inc. will encompass more than 40,000 square feet and will expand the organization's work force with an additional 65 employees.

"This expansion enables us to enhance our mission in the North County area and enables people with developmental disabilities to have a choice for gainful employment and a feeling of purpose," says Kyler Humphrey, a senior partner with Polsinelli and a Lafayette Industries board member.



After 40 years in business, employees of Lafayette Industries are as dedicated as ever to fulfilling the packaging needs of clients. The non-profit has over 400 employees today.

With a high demand for job placement accommodating disabled adults and limited options available, Lafayette's expansion continues. Its employees work a full-time and productive workday, providing a value that goes beyond the paycheck they are able to bring home for both themselves and their caregivers. "Loved ones and caregivers are confident that employees are working in a safe and pleasant work environment with a regular schedule from 8:20 a.m. to 3 p.m. at the Manchester facility and 7:20 a.m. to 2 p.m. at the Berkeley facility," says Libera. "The employees receive job training, self-worth, a paycheck, and camaraderie with co-workers."

Alison, a Lafayette employee and daughter of the company's director of development, advocacy and community relations Alesia Roccia, feels these benefits. "I've learned a lot of different skills like assembly, inventory, shipping labels and reading work orders," says Alison, who went to high school and worked at a day care center for a few hours every day before becoming an employee at Lafayette. "I learn a lot from my supervisors, and I like learning new jobs. I like being on a regular schedule so my mom can work during the day too."

Lafayette employees appreciate the opportunity to continue learning new skills while at work. "Today I worked on putting tags and bar codes on hats," says Casey, a Lafayette employee. "Tomorrow it will be gloves."

With Lafayette employees able to work a full-time job, their caregivers, who may have otherwise had to stay home, are also able to work, which benefits individual families as well as the larger community and economy. "When parents and their children go to work, that's a paycheck going right back to the community," says Libera. "Our employees are proud of the paychecks and like to spend them going out to eat, bowling, at GameStop, shopping or going to the movies, like everyone else."



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A Testimonial From a Parent of an Employee

May 10, 1986, remains one of the happiest days of our lives. Our son Timmy came into this world at 12:13 p.m. But our tears of joy quickly became tears of fear. Our son had oxygen deprivation and faced some challenges.

Fortunately, he survived and thrived, but our biggest fear became: What would he do in his adult years? How could he achieve satisfaction and maintain his social network? We only wanted him to live up to his potential, to be happy, healthy and productive.

After he graduated from high school, we explored the possibilities. Timmy went through the evaluation for competitive employment. He was deemed ready and capable for such an opportunity. But there was no opportunity available. Too often, such jobs go to people who are higher-functioning. Even then, many

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of these individuals work part time and often find themselves without a job when a manager changes or a problem occurs.

Thankfully, we had a choice. The answers to our prayers came from Lafayette Industries back in July 2008. That's when he started work at this place that has become his home away from home.

It was the right choice for Timmy for so many reasons. First, he loves the place and enjoys the variety of responsibilities. Second, he works every day, so it fits his needs

for a schedule. Third, he has made so many friends at Lafayette. Fourth, it provides him with a sense of purpose and bolsters his confidence. Simply put, Timmy pursues a life enriched by his days at Lafayette.

We live in a world too focused on how much you get paid for the work you do. In Timmy's case, we can say that it's not what he gets paid but how it makes him feel. And this young man feels good about his work. Heck, the toughest days now are when he's sick. He doesn't want to stay home since Lafayette needs him, he protests.

We believe Lafayette does more than create opportunities. It builds dreams not just for its workers but also for the families of those workers. Thanks to Lafayette for making Timmy's - and our - dreams come true.

Tim and Debbie S.

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Today Lafayette employs over 400 adults with developmental disabilities on a full-time basis, more than any other company in Missouri.

Roccia recognizes the impact Lafayette has on her daughter's life and on their family. "She packages organic beeswax that you can then order on Amazon," says Roccia. "Our Ace in Arnold carries the product, and my daughter can point it out. She

says, 'I packaged that product.' I'm from a small town in Kansas, and when we go to visit my mom, we go to the hardware store there. Alison says: 'Nana, look. I made that.' She takes so much

pride in that, and then my mom shows her friends and says, 'Look - that's what my granddaughter made.' She can see the impact she makes on the community."

In addition to steady wages, pride in their careers and community, and job stability, Lafayette provides employees with programs to improve their overall life: free flu shots, monthly free and healthy lunches, social programs, sports programs, and expanding facilities.

Lafayette has a culture of dedicated, loyal and productive employees who are working at their place of choice. "We must encourage our employees to take vacation or earned time off," says Libera. "Many employees want to come to work even though they are sick."

And even with its continued expansion, Lafayette has a waiting list of 160 job applicants. "We are at capacity at both of our locations," says Libera. "We have many people who tried to find jobs in competitive employment and didn't have a good experience because it's not predictable hours or because they have special needs that can't be taken care of, whereas we have a personal care assistants who can take care of employees' needs like bowel or bladder issues or medications. We also provide predictable, hourly programs. There are very few other than day care or volunteer, and even these are not always

full-time. And with day care, there is a cost to the family or state and it's not cheap. For some families, it's a financial stretch."

Outside of employing disabled individuals, Lafayette Industries is run like any other business. As a packaging company, it contracts with other companies all over the nation to fulfill their packaging needs to specification and then ships out the products. "We offer our clients quality work,

timely delivery and competitive pricing," says Libera.

The quality of Lafayette's work has earned it many long-term clients - it is still serving its first client from 40 years ago and five clients it has had for two decades. Overall, Libera believes it's important to provide opportunities for people of all abilities. "At Lafayette, we strongly value teamwork and want everyone associated with us to take satisfaction in a job well done," he says. "It is an honor to bring meaningful and productive work to improve quality of life and enhance the dignity of each employee." ■

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