

A MATTER OF PERSPECTIVE: PORTSMOUTH COMPANY PROVIDES JOBS FOR PEOPLE LIVING WITH DISABILITIES

By Jeffrey Symes
One Sky

Only when someone calls her by name does Kiki look up from her work bench. When she does, the “INeverGUp” logo emblazoned on the front of her hoodie is as clear as her smile. Even among the heaps and heaps of electric cables and switches, it’s hard to miss the lime-green hoodies of I Never Give Up (INGU) employees.

There are 16 employees at I Never Give Up, and most, like Kiki, have a disability of some kind. Jim Kane and Mark Friedman started INGU as a way to use the skills and talents of a population often overlooked for employment by providing real work with pay above minimum wage and some benefits.

The most recent figures from the federal Bureau of Labor Statistics put employment among people with disabilities at about 19 percent in 2018. That’s an increase from 18.7 percent in 2017. It’s in stark contrast to more than 65 percent employment for people without a disability last year.

“We’re committed to creating work opportunities for people with disabilities,” says Kane.

The work at INGU also benefits the environment. The LLC start-up occupies a Portsmouth space crowded with used electronic equipment, but there is careful planning in the arrangement. Kiki and her co-workers are working methodically, disassembling electronic units with a relentless focus and placing the separated units into their assigned batches. They work through some 40 to 50 tons of electronic scrap each month and manage to salvage 15 to 17 tons that would otherwise ship to a landfill.

In another large space are stacks of shrink-wrapped pallets destined for exotic locations. It is another aspect of INGU’s operations as it works with numerous vendors in international trade. From hair dyes headed



JIM KANE OF I NEVER GIVE UP GIVES A TOUR OF THE PORTSMOUTH COMPANY TO STATE SEN. MARTHA FULLER CLARK AND ONE SKY EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR CHRIS MUNS.

to Italy to protein powder bound for Saudi Arabia, INGU employees package, label and stage product for shipment around the world.

“Our mindset here is work,” says Kane. “We have high expectations.”

During a recent tour of INGU, state Sen. Martha Fuller Clark and One Sky Community Services Executive Director Chris Muns acknowledged the low employment rates for people with disabilities and the need for more job opportunities. Both are looking for answers to the challenge of finding a spot in the workplace for everyone with a disability.

“I was impressed by what (INGU) has been able to achieve,” says Fuller Clark. “It’s such a successful program. I think it deserves more attention. They’re giving people with disabilities an opportunity to experience success.”

The approach is not without controversy. A job site that becomes dominated by people with disabilities can take on the look of an institution and that can be unnerving for disability rights advocates in New

Hampshire who fought hard to close the Laconia State School nearly 30 years ago. Indeed, in 2016, neighboring Massachusetts became the fourth state in the United States to stop funding the sheltered workshop model that has been a traditional approach in development services.

But there are equally staunch defenders of the workshop model who fear that an all-or-nothing approach focused solely on integrated employment would leave many people with disabilities sitting at home, watching TV with no social outlet. Stories on either side of the approach to employment generate a fierce split among those who see the need and benefit for each service model.

As Kane observes, the subject is worthy of several articles by itself. Doubtless, the work at INGU is not for everyone. It is the kind of job that many people without disabilities don’t want - it’s tedious and repetitive, high-volume industrial work.

What Kane sees is an opportunity for people who are often shut out of community and competitive jobs to build skills, build friendships, and find a purpose

that motivates them. He is open about the INGU approach and willing to share whatever information people might want to know about how they do things.

“I don’t think it eliminates other models where there’s a more inclusive approach,” says Clark. “I think we need both models.”

Kane echoes that thought and sees an important role for INGU in teaching people with no work experience how to adjust to a working world. “There’s room for both models,” he says.

For one recent hire, INGU is his first job and his job coach described some of the progress he’s made since his first day there in adjusting to the working world. In fact, his first challenge at INGU had nothing to do with the work - it was getting used to the idea of an alarm clock waking him each morning and then having to get ready for work. Since those first few bumpy weeks, he’s become an exemplary employee, proud of his production.

And as the industrial world becomes more automated, Kane sees the prospect of a workplace that is more welcoming to a wide range of people with disabilities. Indeed, many tasks at INGU are semi-automated, completed with the aid of a device or a small machine operated by an employee.

“It opens up a lot of opportunity for our folks,” says Kane. “There’s a lot of opportunity for them in creating assistive work environments.”



Incorporated in 1983, One Sky Community Services has been dedicated to providing a comprehensive array of services, supports and programs to individuals and families with intellectual and developmental disabilities, as well as acquired brain disorders. A private 5013C nonprofit organization, it is the designated area agency serving the following communities: Brentwood, Deerfield, East Kingston, Epping, Exeter, Fremont, Greenland, Hampton, Hampton Falls, Kensington, Kingston, New Castle, Newfields, Newington, Newmarket, North Hampton, Northwood, Nottingham, Portsmouth, Raymond, Rye, Seabrook, South Hampton and Stratham. One Sky works with nearly 1,200 individuals and families on a yearly basis.