



TAPinto Piscataway

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Piscataway Popcorn Company wins Easterseal's Disability Employment Expertise Award

By KENNETH SIMMONS

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PISCATAWAY, NJ – The smell of freshly popped popcorn greets visitors as they enter the offices of Popcorn for the People whose bags and tins of gourmet popcorn flavors line the packaging tables in the company's Piscataway production center, waiting to be sold to customers at such places as the Rutgers Football Stadium and to theater goers in New York City.

"We try to stick to the same flavors as much as possible," said Samuel Bier, the nonprofit's president, which include Butter, Buffalo, Caramel, Cookies n' Cream, French Toast, Kettle, Salt and Vinegar, White Cheddar and others.

He recommends "Chicago Baked Cheddar for the savory and Dark Chocolate Espresso for the sweet."

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[Popcorn for the People](#) began in 2014 when Samuel's dad and co-founder, Dr. Steven Bier purchased an existing popcorn business in the Freehold Mall to create a job opportunity for his son, then a high functioning 24-year-old with autism who wanted to be able to go to work.

"There's an 80 to 90 percent unemployment rate in the autistic community," said Steven Bier in an earlier interview with TAPinto's NJ Flavor. "We wanted a self-sustaining business, something that will be here for many years and hopefully ship mass orders."

Related Article: [Piscataway Company Makes Gourmet Popcorn with a Purpose — Employing Adults with Autism](#)

The company has grown tremendously since those early days and now operates out of an Ethel Road production facility in Piscataway. 100 percent of its profits are used to provide job opportunities for about 50 employees, many who are adults with autism and other disabilities.

Six work in the production facility while others sell and promote the gourmet popcorn at venues and events across New Jersey and New York.

Because of the work they're doing to create inclusive workplaces, during October's Disability Employment Month, Easterseals New Jersey awarded Samuel and Popcorn for the People with the Disability Employment Expertise Award.

"They started out small, but their growth has helped us help more people with disabilities at Easterseals," said Anya Holder, Vice President of Marketing at Easterseals New Jersey.

"All of our program participants here are all different diagnosis, all different levels of abilities," said Holder. "They (Popcorn for the People) find something for them to do based on their strengths and what they like to do, so it's a really wonderful partnership."

"They've been amazing in supporting all of our missions," agreed Rachel Cheng, Popcorn for the People's Chief Operating Officer about the partnership. "All of our employees hired through Easterseals also work there."

"We're grateful for organizations like Popcorn for the People who can see past their disability and allow them to come and work," said Holder. "The unemployment rate is still very high for people with disabilities and we're trying to change that but we need companies who are willing to work with us and make opportunities possible."

"We'll continue to reward companies like Popcorn for the People. They're one of three we awarded in October, so it encourages other companies to hire more people with disabilities," she said.

Recently, [TAPinto Piscataway](#) donned a hairnet for a tour of Popcorn for the People's Ethel Road West production facility where Patrick, who has been working with the company for two years joined Samuel Bier to show what goes into making the treats.

"The person who labels the bags gets to have their own label created," said Cheng who explained how the company uses custom made popcorn bags so they can offer more opportunities for employment. "The label tells a little bit about themselves: who it was labeled by, what their favorite flavor is, and what their specialty at work is."

Next up was the production area where a batch of freshly made caramel corn was cooling, waiting to be packaged into the bags and gift tins.

"We try to stick to the same flavors as much as possible," said Samuel, adding how they employ a food scientist who creates the recipes and shows employees how to blend each batch of the handmade treats.

Carefully measured portions are then packaged and sealed in preparation for sale online and at events and venues across the region including Rutgers football games, the Barclays Center in Brooklyn and the Ambassador Theater Group in New York City.

"We're at Joyce Kilmer, Molly Picher, Cheesequake, Woodrow Wilson, and Richard Stockton," Samuel and Cheng listed of the New Jersey Turnpike and Garden State Parkway rest areas that currently stock the brand.

The future is bright for Popcorn for the People. While new flavor options are in the works, Samuel said he hopes to be able to expand business to sell the popcorn in more places, including to big name companies and possibly at venues on the West Coast.

"More popcorn sales mean more employment opportunities," said Cheng. "I think there's been a great partnership between the Easter Seals and Popcorn for the People because we both focus on what each

individual can do versus what they can't. We all have our strengths and weaknesses, so we focus on making sure there are positions available for all kinds of capabilities."

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