

Autistic Employment

Q2 Feature: Priors Court School (UK) – Bread & Beyond

Background and Overview

In keeping with our recent format for Autistic Performance/Employment, this quarter we highlight a recently launched employment programme at Prior's Court, a school of 90 autistic students and 500 staff located near Reading, some 50 miles west of London.

Prior's Court's Founding Patron is Dame Stephanie Shirley, a highly successful entrepreneur in the UK whose autistic son passed away at age 35. Following a visit to the Higashi School in Boston, she was inspired to create a 'beacon' school for children with autism. In 1998 Prior's Court was acquired and funded with a multi-million pound donation from The Shirley Foundation. The first pupils arrived in September 1999 and the school was officially opened by the Princess Royal in May 2000.

Our autism organisations initially collaborated with Prior's Court earlier this year when we provided musicians during a memorial service following the loss of three of its teachers who died in a minibus accident near the school. The Autistic Adult Choir performed at the school's (2nd) annual festival in May.

Bread & Beyond

Earlier this year, Prior's Court opened Bread & Beyond, a commercial bakery within the school. CEO Mike Robinson got this idea from research the school had previously conducted on two autistic commercial, sustainable ventures based in the USA; specifically the Center for Discovery in upstate New York and the Rising Tide car wash in Florida.

While we have seen several autistic bakeries around the world, since baking is an activity which really suits the strength and skills of people with autism (highly process driven, practical and with an end product which is rewarding and motivating), however, Prior's Court's is different – in that it was designed to be regional and even national in both its training and scope of its franchise.

In July 2018, Prior's Court was able to recruit an Artisan Bakery Manager with a grant provided by the Berkshire Freemasons. Dylan Needham, who has worked at major brands Hovis and Warburtons, is based within the purpose built bakery on-site at Prior's Court, where he leads on day-to-day production, quality control, and training the young people and staff members.

The brand itself was created by the global design agency, Elmwood, which has worked with leading global brands including Coca Cola, Nestle and Proctor & Gamble. The Bread & Beyond identity has already received recognition at an international food and drink design awards.

Training

Prior's Court is developing a specific bakery training and development programme for autistic people both for the on-site bakery and which could be used outside the school. Currently, Bread & Beyond have around seven training sessions taking place each week on-site with a growing number of young people already involved. Prior's Court has already been approached by other UK autistic schools for training for their students. One such student begins training at Bread & Beyond in September.



Distribution

While the bakery shop is not open to the general public, Bread & Beyond products are already being sold in small chains nearby as well as in selected farm shops. They also supply all the bread and baked goods to Prior's Court students and staff. This autumn, it has a substantial order to supply bread to the local county show, which is a major regional event.

Geographic Expansion – Franchising

While Management is working on utilising the full capacity of its Prior's Court bakery site, it is also working on fulfilling its ambition of extending the concept to other geographies in the UK, using a franchise type model. Management believes that it has sufficient experience now to be able to franchise the concept to other UK autistic schools or providers of services for autistic adults. It is already working with one such school with which it has a long term relationship. It has also received significant funding from a leading UK retailer to create the franchise model and begin the initial roll out.

At this time, CEO is envisaging 10 such bakeries in selected autistic schools throughout the United Kingdom.

Horticultural Enterprise

Prior's Court is also developing a horticultural vocational enterprise on the school site. In March, Prior's Court students and staff, as well as a team of volunteers from Microsoft, planted 80 apple trees to create Prior's Court orchard. The orchard is one of four key developments in its horticulture strategy to help grow even more vocational learning and work opportunities its students. In a few years' time Prior's Court plans to harvest the fruits to produce its own apple juice, but in the short term the students will be involved with caring for the trees.

While we are aware of leading autism schools possessing both a functional bakery business and a horticultural enterprise (such as Pathlight in Singapore), we know of none which are contemplating using them for centres of national training, distribution and franchising. We applaud Prior's Courts for its innovation and successful implementation to date and plan to continue to monitor (and to assist in) its future development.