



**Virginia Board for People
with Disabilities**

MAX AND GARTH LARCEN

Max's Positive Vibe Café

Recipients of the 2005

OUTSTANDING ACHIEVEMENT AWARD



Approximately 20% of Americans have some form of disability, and the national unemployment rate for people with disabilities aged 21 to 64 is over 30%. In Virginia, almost 30,000 of the 78,000 adults with disabilities in the greater Richmond area are unemployed. For the most part, businesses make little effort to actively recruit employees with disabilities, and few provide additional training and advancement opportunities for them. The determined father and son team of Garth and Max Larcen have set out to change that.

Shortly after Max Larcen was diagnosed with muscular dystrophy (MD) at the age of eight, his father, Garth, left the restaurant business for a new career in insurance to have more time with his family and to help care for Max. Nearly twenty years later, as Max's disability became a growing and frustrating barrier to his own employment, he and Garth decided to return to the restaurant business with a mission to expand employment opportunities not just for Max but for others with disabilities.

In July, 2002, Garth and Max formed the non-profit **Get Lost MD Foundation** and began assembling the support needed to open a restaurant fully accessible to individuals with physical, sensory, and cognitive disabilities for job training and employment as well as for dining. To be successful, they needed to build a team of community volunteers, raise capital, design and equip an appropriate facility, recruit workers interested in food service careers, train them, and come up with a restaurant concept which would attract enough customers, in an extremely competitive market, to sustain both its dining operations and the training program.

Local restaurateurs and chefs volunteered to provide guidance and training. A local church offered its banquet kitchen as a training location until the restaurant could be built and equipped. State agencies, community and advocacy organizations, the area's center for independent living, and local schools referred potential trainees. Training began, and its first graduates began to find employment in other food service operations before the Larcens could even open their restaurant.

Meanwhile, a campaign of creative fundraising activities began to assemble the capital needed to open the restaurant. Concerts, a garden-party auction, and "wardrobe" parties were held. Other restaurants donated a proportion of their proceeds. There were special thrift-shop sales, a "teacher-wear-jeans" day, and sales of Positive Vibe lapel pins. Businesses donated cash, labor, equipment, supplies, and promotional support. Several major corporations made cash and in-kind contributions.



On January 15, 2005, **Max's Positive Vibe Café** opened in the Stratford Hills Shopping Center at Forest Hill Avenue and Hathaway Road in Southside Richmond.

Today, the Positive Vibe Café is a popular neighborhood restaurant that draws diners from far and wide. Its automatic door opens on a comfortable and attractive dining room subtly adapted to be accessible to everyone. Wheelchair users pass easily through wide aisles to booths with fold out tables or to a lowered bar. The décor is complimented by the work of artists with disabilities. Several nights a week, live entertainment is provided, sometimes featuring musicians with disabilities. Lunch and dinner menus feature critically-acclaimed fare emphasizing variety, fresh wholesome ingredients, rich flavors, and attractive presentation.

Training is provided in food preparation, customer service, and restaurant management with an emphasis on accommodating each individual's needs. Bartenders, servers, and entertainers include volunteers who work for tips and serve as role models for the trainees. Many of the Café's staff are graduates of its training program. Additional graduates find employment in other food service operations. A catering service is growing, and ways of expanding that operation and the additional training and employment opportunities it provides are being explored. Restaurant and catering revenues support the training programs, and the Café expects to be self-sufficient in just a few years.

Max's Positive Vibe Café has attracted attention and awards from groups engaged in expanding services and supports for people with disabilities as well as from hospitality industry organizations. Local media coverage led to national newspaper and television attention. Resulting inquiries about duplicating Max and Garth's training and employment model have come from across the country and as far away as New Zealand.

In fall of 2005, the **Virginia Board for People with Disabilities** inaugurated a new award to recognize achievements that have resulted in a better quality of life for Virginians with disabilities and creatively overcome barriers to improve the services and supports available to them. Award recipients must have demonstrated extraordinary efforts beyond what is normally expected, had a lasting effect on the disability services system, and permanently changed lives for the better.

The number and quality of nominations for the award exceeded the Board's expectations. All regions of the state and the full spectrum of public and private services for people with disabilities were represented. The pool of nominees reflected tremendous commitment and achievement. Letters of recommendation from respected, accomplished members of the community were filled with admiration for the nominees.

After careful consideration, the Virginia Board for People with Disabilities selected Max and Garth Larcen of Max's Positive Vibe Café as the recipients of its **2005 Outstanding Achievement Award**. Their selection set a high standard for future nominees, and the Board invites the community to join with them in celebrating the Larcens' achievements and in sharing the lessons to be learned at the Positive Vibe Café. Working together, we can achieve greater opportunities for self-determination, independence, productivity, and inclusion in all facets of community life for all Virginians.

For More Information

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