

By Kimberly Ashton

GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

DENNIS — When Betsy Scott talks to a stranger, she has a difficult time articulating what it is she does on Cape Abilities Farm. Instead, she relies on her hands, jabbing her fingers downward, into imaginary soil. "Is that how you put seeds in the ground?" asks Sarah Cusick, the farm's director of community relations. Scott nods.

Scott was born 34 years ago with significant brain damage and knows she is different from her two sisters, Kristy and Dana, and stands out in society at large, according to her mother, Ginger. At Cape Abilities, as one of about 50 workers who grapple with some sort of disability, she finally feels a sense of community. The eight-acre farm here has a few features not seen on other farms, such as extra-wide space between rows of tomato plants in the greenhouse so workers in wheelchairs can pick vegetables, and asphalt paths for accessibility outdoors. Cape Abilities is a nonprofit organization with a \$10 million budget, a staff of 215, and several business endeavors that include two farms (the other is located in Marston Mills). Executive director Larry Thayer says the abilities of those called disabled are underestimated. "It's not what they can't do, it's what they can do."

Part of Thayer's mission is to dispel what he says is the widely held myth that disabled people don't make good employees. "We work with some of the most honest, interesting individuals I've had the opportunity to come across. And there is no limit to the possibilities anyone can do given the right amount of support," he says. Nevertheless, they represent one of the largest groups of the unemployed.

The support Thayer is talking about starts with a job coach who stays with a new employee until he or she masters a particular skill. These include meticulous tasks like individually planting seeds in grow sheets that will be later transferred to greenhouses, and packing take-away bags for the Salad Club, a program in which a member pays a fee at the beginning of the summer and once a week picks up a grab-bag of freshly-picked produce.

As hard as farm work can be, employees like Kyle Kratschman say they love it. Kratschman, 23, says his favorite job is picking lettuce because it's "easy," but he likes

pretty much all his duties. Employees work on the farm year-round.

Although the farm is now comprised of four greenhouses and patches of outdoor growing areas bearing several large flower beds, it produces a wealth of food including several types of hydroponically grown lettuce — butter crunch, red and green romaine, arugula, salad bowl, and oak leaf — gold and green zucchini, summer squash, eggplant, bell and chili peppers, cucumbers, and a variety of herbs.

And then there is the main cash crop, tomatoes. This year the farm is expected to produce 30,000 pounds of tomatoes, according to Tom Zurn, the farm's director of business development. Hydroponic tomatoes are the signature crop and have earned a reputation of being among the best-tasting on the Cape, Zurn says. Part of the reason is the special nutrient mix in which the roots grow, which was developed at the farm. "You can create the taste that you are looking for," he says. The yield is also helped by extremely efficient pollination, thanks to hundreds of Dutch bumblebees, and by a growing season that lasts until December.

While the tomatoes are not certified organic, Zurn hasn't had to use any pesticides in the three years the farm has been in operation. Tomatoes help draw more than 200 customers a day. "Any nonprofit that's doing entrepreneurial business has to have a great product at a reasonable price in a timely manner," says Thayer. In other words, it's not just good will that motivates people to buy from Cape Abilities. The farm stand usually sells out of tomatoes by noon and some area restaurants are waiting to enlist Cape Abilities as a supplier.

And while produce and flowers are flourishing here, so are the workers. Ginger Scott's daughter Betsy has become much more independent and verbal since she began her job here. "We all want to know that we have a place in the community and she knows that," says her mother.

Betsy also has something in common with her sisters that they can talk about when they get together — a work life.

Cape Abilities, 458 Main St., Dennis, 508-778-5040, www.capeabilities.org

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LARRY THAYER, executive director, Cape Abilities Farm

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