

by Laura Briedis

While the owners of *American Classic Snack Company* won't divulge the homemade ingredients of their 23 popcorn flavors, they do brag about their successful business model: a diverse workforce with loyal employees.

Among the company's dozen employees are two employees with disabilities who have an unmatched work ethic. "We can count on Erasmus and Samantha to always be here on time and ready to work. They truly enjoy working," says Bill Speicher, who co-owns the Wadsworth-based small business along with Bob Walker.

"They are very diligent and focused on their job," adds Bob. "Once they learn a task, they are spot on and we don't have to supervise them."



These part-time employees are responsible for the first step of the popcorn making process. They heat up the oil and pop the jumbo kernels in a large commercial popper, then sift through them and remove any unpopped kernels before the freshly popped popcorn is coated by hand, packaged and sold in local grocery and drug stores.

Employing people with disabilities has proven to be a sound business practice, thanks in part to the assistance of the *Medina County Board of Developmental Disabilities*. This agency provides assessments, training and job placement services to help employees with disabilities become contributing members of the workforce. As part of its job-matching role, it provides businesses with skilled employees to fill different job functions. The MCBDD staff are skilled at identifying employers' needs, finding a good match and sending out job coaches to help employees learn needed job skills—at no cost to the employer. These



Photography: Benjamin Margolis

*American Classic Snack Company* is an area leader in the movement for employing people with disabilities through its partnership with *Medina County Board of Developmental Disabilities*.

## Running a business... it's a **people** thing

*As part of its job-matching role, the Medina County Board of Developmental Disabilities provides businesses with skilled employees who happen to have disabilities. Is your company ready to blaze an enlightened new trail?*

job coaches work alongside the employees until they are trained in their specific job functions.

"Our agency shows local businesses how employees with disabilities can be a viable

solution to their staffing needs," says Ed Dryer, associate director of adult services of the Medina County Board of Developmental Disabilities. "Employees with disabilities are an untapped resource of loyal, dedicated and efficient workers. Nationally, these workers have 85 percent one-year employment retention rates. At our agency, employees stay in the same job for five years, on average, so there is very low turnover, which translates into better productivity."

And it's not only small businesses reaping the rewards. Large corporations such as Westfield Insurance, Sandridge Food Corporation, Giant Eagle, Buehler's Food Markets, Minnehaha Water Outlet, Pinnacle Sports and the YMCA also work with the Medina County Board of Developmental Disabilities to match qualified employees with jobs.

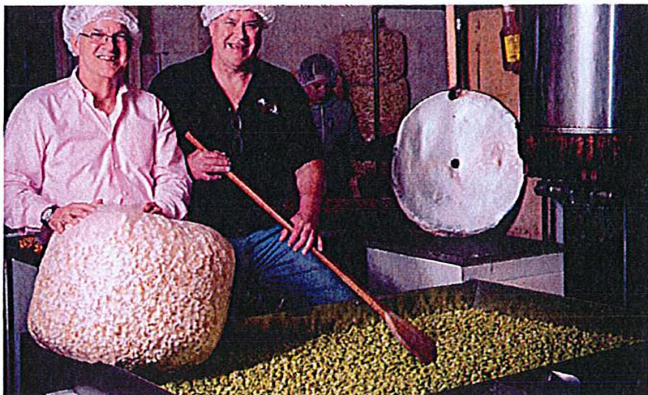
"Employing people with disabilities not only is rewarding for us, but it also means a lot to them," comments Bill. "It is their chance to earn a paycheck and contribute to the community."

"It is a win-win situation," adds Bob. "I enjoy watching the employees blossom into more independent individuals and it has become a part of our successful business equation."

As *American Classic Snack Company* continues to grow—adding a new homegrown, all-natural popcorn line with no GMOs or artificial colorings this summer—the owners plan to hire more employees with disabilities.

"I tell other business owners not to predispose that this won't work for them," comments Bob. "Don't focus on what they can't do. Focus on what they can do."

*The Medina County Board of Developmental Disabilities community employment office is located at 2736 Medina Road, Suite 107, in Medina. Call 330-725-1373, email edd@mcbdd.org or visit MCBDD.org for more information on how you can benefit from its job matching services.*



*American Classic Snack Company* owners (L-R) Bob Walker and Bill Speicher describe the two employees mentored at MCBDD as having an unmatched work ethic.