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The Miracle That is Max and A Farm Less Ordinary

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Greg Masucci and Maya Wechsler had a son, Max, in 2007. In 2009, they gave birth to a daughter named Delilah. In 2010, they learned Max was autistic. Eventually, they would determine that he could not speak and would require one-on-one supervision during his waking hours to keep him safe and engaged in the world around him. Living in DC at the time, Maya and Greg had a particularly difficult time finding Max the appropriate special education resources he needed in the public schools, a challenge shared by other families. Using a combination of publicity, advocacy in front of the DC Council, and private litigation, they waged a successful battle to improve the special education environment in the DCPS. But then, they decided to change their family's trajectory entirely.

Maya and Greg ended up in Bluemont on 24-acres, where they thought they would lead a simpler life. Greg explains, "24 acres was kind of a crazy amount of land for city people. Suddenly we had all this land and we knew that we wanted to continue our advocacy on behalf of the intellectually and developmentally disabled community... and we wanted to do something that we felt would have the most positive impact on the community at large." They decided that "employment was a real linchpin" – the problem that most needed attention. (In Loudoun County, 62.7% of adults with a disability are unemployed, according to a 2019 American Community Survey.)

For background, Greg said, kids with intellectual and developmental disabilities (ID/DD) are afforded special education by the state until age 22, at which point they age out of the system, and "fall off the cliff" towards an uncertain adulthood. Parents often suffer a loss of income as they become full-time caregivers. Their adult children, in turn, often become isolated at home, and face higher rates of depression, obesity, and just plain boredom from this sedentary lifestyle. "We felt employment had the means to address all these issues," Greg said. Employing those with ID/DD would give parents the space they needed to make a living or find respite, and give their loved ones an opportunity to contribute meaningfully to society and to experience a fruitful social life. "I think when you take work away from a person, you take a little piece of their dignity with it."

The answer became A Farm Less Ordinary. The employees it serves are called "Growers" – a nod to both the trades they learn and the other social skills they acquire through the friendships and contributions they make to the Loudoun County food-chain.

Put plainly, "By providing training and employment opportunities to adults with special needs, we offer our Growers a chance to acquire new workplace skills and do meaningful work in a nurturing environment." Because they learn how to process food and make pickles and jams, they also contribute to the "farm-to-table pipeline that will make them valuable additions to other segments of the food industry, such as retail food sales or restaurant work."

Says Greg, "There's something therapeutic about nurturing something from a seed and seeing it grow and taking care of it and then having this tangible example of your efforts – the endless harvestable product that you can eat. It's pretty cool. The Growers really enjoy that." The farm's naturally-grown produce goes to local farmer's markets (this year, they hope to work the Saturday market in downtown Leesburg) where the Growers are proud to show off what they've accomplished. The opportunity to interface with customers is an important and widely useful workplace skill, as is making change.

Greg credits the Virginia Cooperative Extension, USDA and local farming networks for teaching the couple the basics needed to launch a successful farm. While he took on the engineering side of the project like mastering drip irrigation and fence construction, Maya served as the farm's first manager. In their first year of operation, 2015, they donated all the food to various charities. In 2016, the farm had four Growers. By 2022, a Farm Less Ordinary took on 27 paid Growers, plus another 70 volunteer Growers who come to the farm through the Loudoun County Public Schools, local day programs for adults with ID/DD, and the Arc of Loudoun's Aurora School.

"The long and short of it is there just aren't enough transitional opportunities for young people with special needs. We need to do better. My wife and I believe that we need to integrate these folks into the fabric of our society and the best way to do that is to integrate them into employment... because when you're not working, you're marginalized from the start. Here they feel they're contributing in a meaningful way and earning income. The way we see it, we're not only employing people, we're reducing the amount of resources that the county and other governmental organizations need to spend to take care of people. We feel like it's a win-win." Parents recognize that the couple, because of their experience in raising an autistic son with high support needs, is more sensitive to Growers' needs and more committed to their productive futures.

*Opposite Page, Top: Maya and Greg pose with their Growers at the 2021 ribbon-cutting for the Farm's Lovettsville location
Bottom: Grower Ian Pham takes seedlings grown in the farm's greenhouse and plants them in the ground outside*

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Growers Miguel Aramayo and Jonathan Shearrow show off their broccoli harvest

Greg says he and Maya have always believed that people have a greater capacity for growth than we give them credit for. “Often a person with special needs only hears about what they can’t do. There are plenty of things I can’t do: I can’t ride rodeo. But it’s ridiculous to judge people by only one criterion.” When Growers start out at A Farm Less Ordinary, they often suffer from depleted confidence. “We start them out seeding trays until they master that task and move on, building incremental competence and, with it, their confidence. As they master tasks, they become more confident in their own abilities, and they’re more likely to be less resistant to taking on new challenges or changes. They ask ‘what else could I do?’ It’s growth that happens right before your very eyes.”

The miracle that is Max gives credence to this conviction. Max stopped speaking when he was three years old. When he was tested by the “experts,” the couple was told he likely had an IQ of around 45. “We always thought he was reasonably intelligent.... So, we tried numerous types of therapies to help him and reach him. He was a black box for basically 10 years until January of 2021 when my wife introduced a program called Rapid Prompting Method.” Using the method, people with autism and other cognitive or intellectual disabilities spell out words letter by letter on a letter board. Max picked it up quickly and within three months he was constructing elaborate sentences using a very impressive vocabulary. He now types



A Farm Less Ordinary is now using borrowed farmland in Lovettsville and Leesburg, but is looking for land it could either purchase or use permanently. Please let them know if you have ideas on this, or ask how to participate in their upcoming capital campaign. Ideally, the organization would have at least 10 acres with access to restroom facilities, and room to build a barn and a commercial kitchen.

It’s easy to get involved by either donating at afarmlessordinary.org/take-action or volunteering at afarmlessordinary.com/volunteer. As the site says, “Whether you are an individual, family or company in search of a team-building event, there is always work to be done on the farm!” For employment opportunities, see afarmlessordinary.com/employment. To read some of Max and Maya’s writing, visit shortbusdiaries.com.

on a computer keyboard. Through this process, Maya and Greg actually learned that Max does not have an intellectual disability.

By October 2021, Max's writing was so prolific and creative that his parents submitted an essay he wrote to the New York Times Middle Schoolers Essay Contest. Max's essay placed second among some 12,800 entries. "This, from a kid that everybody had written off and told me he was severely intellectually disabled. It just goes to show you that a lot of times, you know, what people see is not necessarily accurate. They only see what they want to see. We need to give people a chance; let them prove what they can and can't do and don't make assumptions."

Greg added, "I believe, right now, at this very moment, there are thousands or maybe hundreds of thousands, maybe millions of kids out there like Max who are not intellectually disabled - people just assume they are - who are just dying for a means to communicate with the outside world. I can only imagine how lonely and horrible it must have felt for my son to be trapped in his head all that time." Among the first desires that Max communicated was that he wanted to meet new people and make friends. When asked, what would he like to tell others about himself he said, "I am not retarded," which is heartbreaking. Clearly, that's not a word we use in my household, so it's a word that other kids must have taught him.... As heartbreaking as that is, we feel like we have an opportunity to meet our son for the first time and get to know something about him, and that's been just incredible for us. We believe you shouldn't assume that, because somebody has a disability that impacts some of their functions, that it determines how smart they are, or how able they are to do a job. All we're saying is give them a chance."

Max, now 15, wants to go to college and he'd like to become a writer. "I want to be careful to say we don't care where he goes, we love him as he is, but we think he has the potential to be an important voice for people like himself."






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