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Special Touch Bakery expands pie-making operation at new facility

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You'd have to have an especially crusty character to not have your heart warmed by the Special Touch Bakery. Take a recent day, when the operation was gearing up for Thanksgiving, its busiest time of year. It will make and sell more than 1,400 pies for the holiday.

While the environment is lighthearted, the workers are focused on the pies that need to be completed. The pies are made entirely from scratch from fresh ingredients, and many tasks are done by hand. A few bakers crimp the crusts with the firm but gentle pressure of their thumbs; one

See **BAKERY**, Page **8A**



Andrew Sleeman lines up apple pies made at Special Touch Bakery. JAMIE GERMANO/@JGERMANO1/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER



Apple pies stack up to be topped at Special Touch Bakery. JAMIE GERMANO/@JGERMANO1/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

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Continued from Page 1A

is given a gentle reminder to rotate the crust as he works. Another baker presses the imprint of a heart into the center of each pie.

People who have intellectual and developmental disabilities work alongside people who don't.

"To us here, a baker is a baker," said Joe Perdicho, director of operations for the bakery. "They are all treated and paid the same."

The pies originated more than 30 years ago, when the School of the Holy Childhood in Henrietta started baking pies as a vocational training activity in a classroom. As the school became more proficient, it started selling them. Soon they were in high demand.

"It just took off," said Donna Dedee, Holy Childhood president and CEO. In 1989, it became its own entity, a division of Holy Childhood. By 2002, it was making 17,000 pies a year from its 700-square-foot kitchen.

But that operation had to change as the state Office of People With Developmental Disabilities mandated that traditional "sheltered workshops" for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities must end by the year 2020.

"We really had to transform our workshop operations," Dedee said.

The bakery decided to expand its business and capacity in order to offer employment opportunities to both people who have disabilities and those who don't.

Construction on the \$2.6 million, 20,000-square-foot facility on Mt. Read Boulevard began in April and it opened in October. The bakery employs 25 workers with and without disabilities and it expects to create 40 new positions by its fifth year.

"With the expansion of the bakery, it opens up a wider array of opportunity," Dedee said.

In its first few days, the expanded operation made 250 pies per day. Now the output is 1,000 per day.

"We believe that the capacity out there is 10,000 pies per day," said Perdicho.

Some tasks, most notably the rolling and cutting of the crusts, have been automated. Machines are used to form the pie crust dough into puck-like cylinders and press them into the pans. Another machine rolls the dough pucks into an even thickness for the pies that have top crusts.

Dedee said that the facility has a best-ofboth- worlds approach. When people with disabilities have few peers in a work environment, they can feel isolated. At the new bakery, they have many coworkers with disabilities, while also working alongside people without disabilities.

“There’s a nice balance,” Dedee said. “That makes them all feel comfortable.”

Scheduling for people with disabilities is done according to the number of hours they want to work as well as their available transportation.

Lisa Newman, 52, started working at the original Special Touch Bakery at the age of 29; away from work, she enjoys watching *Law and Order: Special Victims Unit*. She is happy with the expanded size and staff.

“There’s more friends here and I like being around people like (Dedee),” she said. Anthony Genazzio, 27, also transitioned from the original bakery. He said the new facility is better because it has “new machines, new friends, new supervisors.”

The expansion required hiring a new group of people without developmental disabilities. For those roles, Perdicho looked for people with attributes such as compassion and empathy over baking experience.

“We hand-selected those people who fit the culture first,” said Perdicho. “I can teach someone how to mix dough but not to be compassionate.”

One of the new staff members is Akil Anderson, a recent graduate of the University of New Hampshire. While he did not have a background in working with people with disabilities, his interest was piqued when his girlfriend, Kathryn Sattora, would talk about her work; she is an occupational therapist at the school. Anderson, a 24-year-old Morristown, New Jersey, native, had previously worked for a car rental company. “It was more of a sales position and I was taking in all the money that I could get — which I was really good at,” said Anderson, whose charismatic, engaging personality is evident. “But at the end of the day it didn’t really fulfill me like I feel like I’m fulfilled here.” “I think I found a home here at Holy Childhood,” he said with a wide smile. Haley Shuman, an ebullient 26-year-old, joined Special Touch in early September as assistant bakery manager; she previously was the bakery manager at Hegedorn’s Market and assistant pastry chef for the Rochester Riverside Convention Center. “I was kind of tired of retail, and I wanted to get into something that I really feel good about,” she said. She had worked with a person with a disability at Hegedorn’s and “he was one of my favorite people there.”

“I love working with these people — they are amazing,” she said. “They all have their own personalities. We love joking around.” A group of trainees is considered prevocational; the hope is that they will learn the process, gain skills and get hired at a competitive wage.

Wegmans played a major role in advising Perdicho during planning and construction, Perdicho said. Palmer Food Services, a Rochester- based wholesale food service distributor, is distributing the pies to restaurants and institutions.

The work opportunities will continue to expand in December, when the Mount Read facility opens a cafe that serves pie, along with coffee beverages such as lattes and espressos. “We’re hoping to set a standard,” said Dedee. “All employers could take a page out of this book.”

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