



*Angela Hayes and Matthew Hayes organize items in the country store.*

# Fulfilling *hopes and dreams* at Aunt Marilyn's Farm

*HarvestWorks offers job training, fun and a sense of belonging to the developmentally disabled*

*By Renee Gannon*

As I watch my 3-year-old daughter Megan happily go about her busy life, I often wonder what her future holds. Will she continue to enjoy the world and all it brings? Graduate from high school? Find a job? These are questions I do not heavily ponder with Megan's two sisters Erin and Rachel. Megan has Down syndrome.

Like every parent of a special needs child, I believe that Megan will find a place in this world as she grows older. A group of parents in Shelby, had the same belief for their special kids, and they created that place: HarvestWorks.

## ***Somewhere to belong***

A paycheck. That's what makes bright, blue-eyed Tamara smile. Before HarvestWorks, Tamara, who is developmentally disabled, worked as a cook at the North Shelby School for special needs students. After the school's kitchen suffered fire damage, she came to HarvestWorks. "I work for HarvestWorks!" she enthusiastically exclaims. "I help out. If something needs to be done, we do it ahead of time!"

In addition to volunteering in the

North Shelby School younger grades, Tamara also helps with the summer programs at HarvestWorks, as well as with the daily activities the center provides its clientele. She also knits and sells her crafts in the retail store.

Tamara earns her paycheck by working on the HarvestWorks mobile cleaning crew and at the retail store—two spokes in the HarvestWorks wheel developed by the center's board of directors and Travis Mangum, board chairman and the driving force behind this place.

Mangum himself has two children with developmental disabilities. His children, Grayson and Whitley, are in motorized wheelchairs and need continual support. Many of the HarvestWorks board members also have children with special needs. Other board members provide services to the special needs population or serve as community leaders in Cleveland County. All agreed that the region needed a place for people with developmental disabilities to work, play and feel part of the community, especially the young adults leaving school.

By law in North Carolina, students with disabilities must leave high school by age 21, with or without a diploma. Neither Mangum nor other parents of children with special needs saw the area's sheltered workshop and adult day care facilities as the answer to their children's needs.

Once they are out of school, special needs students often see vocational services, support and therapies dry up along with their school classes. Mangum and other parents called community leaders, school leaders, vocational rehabilitation personnel and others to a roundtable discussion about meeting the needs of the developmentally disabled. In the end, the group decided to create a provider agency for direct care services. The center concept, the hub of the wheel, explains Mangum, would simply "provide job opportunities for those who want a job, and for those not able to hold a job, to start a day support program so they would have somewhere to go for activities and services. We wanted a happy place for people."

## ***Aunt Marilyn's Farm begins***

Inspired by Mangum's late sister, Marilyn, the group went to work building a place for their kids and others. "Marilyn was the first person to convince my wife and me that having a child with a disability is not the end of the world," says Mangum.

When your child is diagnosed with a developmental disability, you feel as if all your hopes and dreams for you and your family have been trashed. But we all have someone in our lives who puts things in perspective and reminds us that we must be the strongest advocate for our kids because no one else will. Marilyn was that person for Travis Mangum.

Mangum has a theory: "I think there are four stages to a tragedy. When you first hear something is wrong, you feel pity for yourself, it's the end of the world, life is over as we know it. Step two is the search for a second opinion, not quite accepting what's been handed to you. Step three is acceptance and knowing you can deal with it. Step four is making something positive out of the negative. That's where HarvestWorks comes from."

A \$50,000 Dover Foundation grant helped the wheel start turning. In May 2003, HarvestWorks purchased 18 acres off Highway 180 in Shelby that also included an old farmhouse. The Mangum family purchased and donated an adjacent two-acre lot that fronts the highway. And with the help of Marvin Hutchison, the area's USDA Rural Development Center representative, the center earned a \$700,000 long-term, low-interest USDA loan. Other grants helped add to what HarvestWorks could offer the community.

The center became licensed to provide community-based services (CBS) and community alternative programs (CAP) through Pathways, the local mental health agency that also assists HarvestWorks with Medicaid billing. It serves five counties: Cleveland, Lincoln, Gaston, Rutherford and Polk.

## ***6 spokes of the HarvestWorks wheel***

In July 2003, HarvestWorks officially opened with two clients. The center has 100 now. Clients' ages range from 3 to 43 years old, serving the alphabet soup of developmental disabilities, from mild to profound. HarvestWorks has something to offer a client, no matter the age or ability.

Mangum refers to the six main HarvestWorks components as spokes of a wheel. All spokes offer employment and activities to the developmentally disabled, while also providing for the community's needs:

- Naturally-grown field crops and organic vegetables in the greenhouse, with produce marketed and sold.
- Mobile lawn crews, mobile landscaping crews, mobile catering crews and mobile home and business cleaning crews.
- Day Activity Services where clients who do not work participate in activities, therapies and one-on-one time with CAP and CBS providers.
- Retail Store, which provides an outlet for local artists and the center's participants to sell crafts; and the Coffee Shop, "Hopes, Dreams and Coffee Beans."
- Supportive Employment Training that offers vocational services to clients with the hope that one day some may find employment outside of HarvestWorks.
- Other endeavors, including nature trails around the farm's property, school and farm tours, and microenterprises such as the petting zoo.

Shannon operates the petting zoo and pony rides at the barn on weekends. HarvestWorks helps Shannon promote his business, but he does all the work, including caring for the barn animals, and pockets the money earned. He has a stake in the business, so it is important to Shannon to make it work.

"I try my best to make all the kids happy when they visit," says Shannon. "I don't like to see them sad. I love animals and love to take care of them."

Microenterprises have been successful across the state for people with severe disabilities. Explains Mangum: "It gives our clients one more option, one more spoke in our wheel. If a client has a passion for something, like Shannon does for animals, HarvestWorks wants to help set them up."

HarvestWorks ideally would like to train its clients to work outside of its walls. The center wants to be a bridge to the community, to show the community what its clients can do.

Before coming to HarvestWorks, Matthew, who has cerebral palsy, volunteered at the local hospital's registration department. He greeted patients, showed the way to the different departments, offered water and comfort. He per-

formed a great service to patients, but he reached the age where he needed to be independent and have his own money. That's when he came to HarvestWorks.

As the center's jack-of-all-trades and the resident "dynamo in a wheelchair," Matthew works in the retail store where he runs the register and helps visitors, serves as an office assistant and relieves the telephone operator for breaks.

"I meet people, earn a paycheck and have fun," says Matthew. "That's what HarvestWorks means to me."

## ***Both smiles and opportunities***

HarvestWorks offers its clients many different opportunities to find their niche. "We never look at a person's disability," says Mangum. "We look at their abilities."

Matthew, Shannon and Tamara are just a few examples of why clients and employees love working for HarvestWorks. "We see the day-to-day impact HarvestWorks has on our clients," says Shanna Capps, community outreach coordinator for the center. "We see the smiles on their faces as they walk through the door and the changes made in their lives. When you see that, you know what life is all about."

Travis Mangum hopes to see at least five more HarvestWorks open across North Carolina, and as many as 200 across the nation. So many people need the opportunity this type of business offers. Visit [www.harvestworksinc.org](http://www.harvestworksinc.org) or call (704) 487-7777 to learn more. 📞



*Shannon, pictured with Bandit, runs a petting zoo microenterprise at HarvestWorks. The business grew from his love and care of the animals at the center's barn.*

Renee Cannon