

When employers said no, these disabled Long Islanders said yes to starting their own businesses



Kimberly Minto of Elmont plans to launch the website for her digital fashion and lifestyle magazine this month. Credit: Debbie Egan-Chin

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Long Islanders with disabilities have long struggled to find good-paying, steady jobs and some advocates say it's time for a new tack: entrepreneurship.

Job training and opportunities for disabled jobseekers have been championed by advocates and elected officials for decades. And while making traditional job opportunities more available and educating employers on how to accommodate workers with disabilities remains the goal, self-employment has emerged as another potential avenue for financial security.

For Kimberly Minto, 30, who graduated from Hofstra University in 2015 with a degree in marketing, the choice to start her own business this year came after a long struggle to find traditional employment.

"I was like 'You know what, I've got nothing to lose,'" said Minto, an Elmont resident who has cerebral palsy and uses a wheelchair.

WHAT TO KNOW

- Some disabled Long Islanders are creating their own career opportunities by starting businesses.
- Their move to entrepreneurship often comes after years of searching unsuccessfully for traditional employment.
- New programs are aimed at providing training and support to disabled individuals who want to launch businesses.

Minto said while in school she couldn't find the kind of part-time work available to many college-aged students, like retail or hospitality. As a result, she said her lack of job experience made it harder for her to find even low-level work in marketing after graduation.

"They weren't giving me the opportunity to say what I could and couldn't do," Minto said.

To break up the monotony of the job hunt, in 2021 she started writing a blog about her love of fashion and experiences as a woman with a disability. In January of this year, she began pursuing the idea of launching a digital magazine focused on fashion, beauty and lifestyle tips for disabled women, *Sitting Beauty*.

Minto said she plans to launch the website for the magazine this month,. She plans to sell ad space to brands that want to advertise to the disabled community and the type of audience she wants to cultivate.

"I would have been OK working for someone else and doing disability advocacy on the side," she said. "But I've also learned that in living with a disability...a lot of the skills that you have to pick up to live are part of entrepreneurship.

"I'm a great problem solver because I live in a world not designed for wheelchair users," she said. "I'm persistent."

Leading advocates for Long Islanders with disabilities said stories like Minto's are a prime example of the power of self-employment.

"Entrepreneurship and small business development represent an important opportunity for people with disabilities to find a pathway to both meaningful work and economic self-sufficiency," said Chris Rosa, president and chief executive of the Viscardi Center, an Albertson-based non-profit network serving disabled Long Islanders.

Rosa's organization launched an initiative this year to bring business startup education to the fore for Islanders struggling to land work.

The group partnered with Iona University in New Rochelle this spring to host a startup education pilot program, IdeaSpark. Viscardi is also partnering with Hofstra University on a five-session online workshop series that began this month.

“In some respects, one of the reasons why entrepreneurship is such a compelling solution for people with disabilities is it takes that all-important hiring authority out of someone else’s hands and places it squarely on the shoulders of the business launcher with a disability,” Rosa said.

The October launch of Viscardi’s workshop series coincides with National Disability Employment Awareness Month, a federally recognized annual effort to promote the contributions of Americans with disabilities.

Entrepreneur training offered

Viscardi isn’t alone in its entrepreneurship education efforts.

In January, the state’s Developmental Disabilities Policy Council launched its Center for Disability Entrepreneurship Program in partnership with the Small Business Development Center at Farmingdale State College.

The local SBDC, through a \$215,000 grant, is helping coordinate with 10 other SBDCs around the state to offer virtual training and education workshops over a period of three years for those with disabilities looking to go into business for themselves.

To date, 485 disabled individuals, or family members on their behalf, have participated in one or more of the workshops.

“It’s just another way for people in this population to gain revenue and become financially independent,” said Lauren Linakis, assistant director of the Farmingdale SBDC. “It doesn’t have to be a full time 24/7 endeavor. If they want the flexibility of having their own business, this program will give them those tools.”

Advocates said these efforts provide a valuable resource for a group of workers who continue to be disadvantaged in the job market.

Lack of reliable transportation to and from work, limited availability of accessibility tools or reasonable accommodations in the workplace, and overall stigma have all historically made obtaining a job that much harder for disabled jobseekers.

Even coming out of the pandemic with its tectonic shifts toward more remote work options — often seen as a major benefit to disabled workers — many continue to face obstacles to employment.

The New York State unemployment rate for workers ages 16 to 64 with disabilities was 11.9% in 2022, according to an analysis of federal data by the State Comptroller’s office, nearly triple the rate for those without a disability.

Several Long Islanders with disabilities said going into business for themselves has so far proven to be the right move.

Marc Berlin, 54, of Cedarhurst said he's been looking for steady, good-paying work for years, a struggle that led him to launch his own patient advocacy business, On the Marc Patient Advocacy Services, in 2020.

Berlin, who has cerebral palsy and a mild learning disability, said while he has had opportunities come along, often the pay doesn't reflect his educational background. Berlin has an undergraduate degree in business management and a master's in health care administration.



Marc Berlin launched his own patient advocacy business after years of struggling to find work. Credit: Howard Simmons

"I have not been offered a decent salary position that I'm qualified for that's better than my disability and supplemental income," Berlin said. "It's been very hard."

Balancing the financial pros and cons of working is a dilemma that individuals with disabilities who receive safety net benefits like Supplemental Security Income or Social Security Disability Insurance often face. If their income rises, these payments can be reduced.

Given the challenges many disabled individuals can face with holding onto employment, whether due to lack of accommodations or recurring health absences, the guarantee of consistent benefit payments can outweigh the desire or need to work.

Berlin, who graduated from George Washington University, said since finishing grad school and returning to Long Island in 1997, his work history has been a smattering of lower-wage, or part-time work in the health and human services field.

In 2011, with little money coming in from work at a medical alert company and few prospects for a better paying, full-time job, Berlin went on disability to supplement his income. He's held a part-time job doing medical record compliance work for a mental health center in Brooklyn since 2013, but still faces financial challenges and continues to apply for work, he said.

To circumvent the challenges of the job market, Berlin made the decision to launch his own patient advocacy business with the aim of using his education and first-hand experiences navigating social safety net and health care programs to help disabled and older Long Islanders live independently.

Berlin said he's so far been able to assist several clients, but said marketing his young business remains difficult, even as he continues to network with owners of businesses providing at-home health services.

"Starting a business is definitely tough. But when you have a disability it's even tougher because you have to prove your credibility," Berlin said. "You have to show clients that you're trustworthy and believable."

Thousands of resumes sent

For Michael J. Kalberer, 45, entrepreneurship has provided a means to earn an income after years of struggling to find work.

In late 2020, Kalberer launched Michael J. Kalberer Presents Inc., an educational public speaking business that consults with businesses, health care providers and academic institutions on how to work with disabled employees, patients and students.

"I wanted to make the experience people have with me and individuals like me more dignified," said Kalberer, a blind wheelchair user who lives in Mineola. Kalberer has cerebral palsy and lives with Leber congenital amaurosis, a retinal degenerative disease.



Michael Kalberer got help from the Small Business Development Center at Farmingdale State college to launch his consultancy and education business. Credit: Newsday/J. Conrad Williams Jr.

To help get his business off the ground, in 2019 Kalberer sought the services of the Small Business Development Center to help him develop a business plan.

Kalberer said as his job search went on over the years and he got older, he became fearful over what would happen to his own sense of independence if he couldn't land gainful work.

From 2006 to around 2020, he sent out thousands of resumes, landing intermittent job opportunities in social work, but nothing full-time or permanent, said Kalberer, a state licensed social worker.

"Like many individuals with disabilities, I was having a great deal of trouble becoming employed in the traditional sense," he said. "I would get the second and third interview but not get the ultimate reward of a paycheck."

Now, with money coming in from his speaking engagements and educational presentations, he hopes to promote entrepreneurship as an alternative path for others facing similar circumstances.

"I don't blame stigma or prejudice or anything like that on my desire to start my company," he said. "I just realized I wasn't getting the results I wanted."

Amputation was the best choice

When he was 25, Dan Bastian, co-owner of Progressive Orthotics & Prosthetics in Albertson, made the difficult decision to have doctors amputate his right leg above the knee.

Bastian, now 58, made the decision after years of medical intervention meant to save his leg and treat the effects of osteogenic sarcoma — a type of cancer — only worsened his quality of life.

“In the long run it was the best decision I’ve ever made,” said Bastian of Massapequa.

That experience, and the experience of becoming a prosthetics user, ultimately inspired Bastian to pursue work as a prosthetist — a health care professional who designs and fits prostheses. In 1999, Bastian and his business partner Sal Martella went into business for themselves, opening Progressive out of a 2,000-square-foot retail space in Carle Place.



Dan Bastian, co-owner of Progressive Orthotics & Prosthetics in Albertson, says having his own business has allowed him flexibility to accommodate his health needs. Credit: [Newsday/J. Conrad Williams Jr.](#)

“We started with a file cabinet,” Bastian recalls. “It was difficult times back then. But Sal and I both knew that we were both meant to run a company.”

With no outside investment, the business grew slowly but steadily over the years. Over that time, Bastian said he's had a few instances in which his disability has presented difficulties.

"It's not easy being a business owner with a disability," said Bastian, who said he experienced discrimination earlier in the business's lifespan, particularly when seeking business banking services.

It wasn't uncommon for lending officers to visibly react to Bastian's use of a prosthesis, and often it would take the focus away from the business's financials, he said.

"But once they get to know me and how dedicated I am to this company being successful, then that whole thing goes out the window," he said. "They forget they're dealing with an amputee."

The biggest challenge he's faced as a business owner, however, has been the effect his medical condition has had on his time in the office.

Over the course of his life, Bastian has had 52 surgeries, most of which have required a recovery period afterwards.

It's a pattern he and Martella have grown used to, he said. Having the built-in accommodation of a supportive business partner and friend has made his longtime ownership possible, he said.

"I overcame that by having a partner that was like a brother to me," Bastian said.

Minto of Elmont said she sometimes finds it hard to believe that she's going to be a business owner.

"It's still hard for me to say, 'Yes, I'm an entrepreneur now,'" said Minto, who earlier this year won first place in the inaugural IdeaSpark Pitchfest, the culminating event in the Iona and Viscardi entrepreneur pilot program.



Kimberly Minto says her idea for a digital fashion magazine for wheelchair using women was inspired by Instagram. Credit: Debbie Egan-Chin

Minto, who won \$4,000 to help launch her publication, said she likely wouldn't have pursued self employment had her job search gone differently.

The job hunt had grown increasingly frustrating after graduation, with multiple positive interviews leading to nothing. On one occasion, after receiving a formal job offer and then waiting on an official start date for a customer service role, Minto said she was told the position was no longer available.

When she followed up to ask if they had any other positions that might work for a wheelchair user, she never heard back, Minto said.

While she said she doesn't know for a fact whether she was discriminated against in the hiring process, she said she is keenly aware that employers may make snap judgments based on the perception of her abilities.

Now, she finds herself in the driver's seat of a new enterprise with the opportunity to help others.

"At a young age I always knew I was going to do something for the disabled community, I just didn't know what," she said.

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