Starting Up Disability Entrepreneurship

The program empowering innovators with disabilities nationwide to be their own boss.

When Dr. Henry Viscardi, Jr. first launched what would become The Viscardi Center in 1952, he turned his vision of accessibility and inclusion into a reality. Skipping ahead to today’s fast-changing world, The Viscardi Center’s National Center for Disability Entrepreneurship (NCDE) is setting the next generation of aspiring founders with disabilities on the road to self-employment success.

“NCDE is an extension of The Viscardi Center’s Dr. Henry Viscardi, Jr., a true entrepreneur who wore prosthetic legs and served as a disability advisor to eight U.S. presidents,” says Victoria Rodriguez Minowitz, Executive Director of NCDE. “He created an internationally recognized model by launching the first U.S. business to be staffed primarily by veterans with disabilities. Today, NCDE plays a pivotal role in expanding Dr. Viscardi’s legacy for our nation’s founders with disabilities, to ensure we offer a powerful pathway to a brighter economic outlook.”

The entrepreneurship landscape lacks diversity. Venture firm Backstage Capital reports that less than 10% of venture capital deals went to women and minority groups, and this underwhelming data doesn’t touch on cash flow to founders with disabilities, which is likely even less. While the pandemic has forever altered the American workforce, one fact remains: people with disabilities continue to encounter disproportionate barriers to employment and financial independence.

NCDE’s virtual program, which was formed with support from the Marks Family Foundation, seeks to close the employment and leadership gap by advancing the first viable business ecosystem for entrepreneurs with disabilities across the U.S. The program equalizes access for individuals honing unique business ideas, providing a skills-building curriculum, mentorship, an accelerator fund, and opportunities to showcase their ideas before an interactive, online audience. Enrollees also receive in-depth training in self-advocacy, with topics ranging from unconscious bias to social security disability benefits.

Since the first cohort completed the program last fall, ten participants are already growing businesses. (Turn to page 3 to read about Julie and her interior design company.) The cycle begins again as the diverse second cohort began their training this spring, culminating in a PitchFest Competition in which enrollees present polished pitch decks to a panel of elite judges and compete for equity-free cash prizes and mentorship packages.

Learn more about the National Center for Disability Entrepreneurship at ViscardiCenter.org
When it comes to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) there are many intersections – race, gender, LGBTQ, age, religion, national origin. I’m a Caucasian, male, baby boomer with a disability. My age and disability place me into a marginalized group. In fact, I recently penned a blog for Age Inclusion in Media addressing the stereotyping and discrimination against individuals and groups based on age, let alone the presence of a disability.

With pride, I share that The Viscardi Center began its own DEI Movement in the Fall of last year. This journey is intended to transform our entire organization, and ourselves, into the most equitable and fair entities and individuals we can be. We’ve made a commitment to fairness and equity in all aspects of our operations, including Board membership; recruitment, retention and advancement of staff; selection of diverse suppliers and vendors; marketing of programs and services; accessible software and services; and to review and make appropriate changes to processes, systems, and policies.

Yes, this is quite an undertaking, but shouldn’t Viscardi lead in self-examination and self-improvement that assures our various communities, many of whom are often relegated to the sidelines, have fundamental equality and true inclusiveness? Unequivocally, we say...yes.

For nearly 70 years, The Viscardi Center has improved lives by creating pathways to independence. Now, after some of the longest and most difficult months we’ve ever endured, wonderful opportunities are blooming once again this spring season.

**Extraordinary possibilities are unfolding for the children and adults we serve:**

- Aspiring entrepreneurs from around the country are receiving the mentorship they need to bring unique ideas to life and start their own businesses.
- High-achieving Henry Viscardi School students are completing their academic year, with seniors set to graduate and journey to college.
- Adolescents are getting ready to tend to Viscardi’s campus Smile Farms garden, where they will grow peppers to be made into a signature bottled hot sauce.
- Adults are safely returning to our Bridge and Day Habilitation programs, some after over a full year at home, where they can socialize, learn, and reconnect with their peers.
- Participants in our revamped hybrid culinary training program will soon access in-person and online vocational training sessions that prepare them for competitive jobs.

Incredible support from the community continues to sustain the unparalleled education and employment services individuals with a wide range of disabilities count on daily.

**To help support our operations as we emerge from these uncertain times, please visit us at** ViscardiCenter.org/Spring
Meet Julie

Julie always dreamed of running a business. Since completing the National Center of Disability Entrepreneurship (NCDE) program, taking second place in its first-ever PitchFest Competition last November, and nabbing her very first client — a guest of the program’s virtual graduation ceremony — that dream is coming true.

“I found a community where I could grow,” Julie says about her NCDE experience, where she received mentorship from subject matter experts and engaged in an eight-month-long training curriculum. “I feel that I can make a difference in the lives of others.”

Seeking guidance, Julie enrolled in NCDE in the spring of 2020. She developed a timely idea — helping professionals, especially those working from home, transform work areas or offices into attractive, functional spaces. She’s now the proud owner of interior design company Realign My Space based in Miami.

Julie says getting started with an appropriate bank account for her new business did come with some unexpected obstacles, although she knew how to handle them.

“With the help of NCDE, I was better suited to speak to an associate about opening an account right away. I also wouldn’t have been knowledgeable of the financial resources offered to people with disabilities starting a small business.”

Equipped with a new laptop (turn to page 4 to read about the generous philanthropists providing essential technologies and more to the Viscardi community), a much-needed replacement for her old computer with a broken mic, Julie is using her cash prize from the PitchFest Competition to design a brand logo and establish a strong online and social media presence. She expects to sign two new clients this spring.

The National Center for Disability Entrepreneurship has welcomed its second cohort of aspiring founders this spring. Learn more about the program at ViscardiCenter.org/NCDE

NewsBytes

Read our latest blog

More than ever, organizations are being measured by their commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). Check out the latest digital accessibility trends you need to keep in mind as we usher in a more inclusive future for all. Read on at ViscardiCenter.org/viscardi-blog

Tune into our web series

The National Business & Disability Council presents Office Hours with John D. Kemp — a monthly series with business leaders and experts championing the disability community. On May 18, we’re chatting with Bill Novelli, GOOD BUSINESS: The Talk, Fight, Win Way to Change the World. Save your seat at NBDC.com

Sunny Days

One furry staff member has made this tough year a little easier. Students are building up their strength and confidence with “fist bumps” and encouragement from Sunny, Viscardi’s facility dog. Playing an important role in students’ daily motivation and social-emotional learning, Sunny has been going on leashed walks in physical therapy, getting groomed by students developing fine-motor skills in occupational therapy, and listening in during reading time in elementary school classes.

Taking the Spotlight

Music was in the air in Viscardi’s Multimedia Learning Center production studio as student singers recorded songs for this year’s Virtual Celebrity Sports Night fundraiser on May 20. In its 54th year, the event brings together local businesses, philanthropists, community leaders, celebrities, and professional athletes to raise funds for critical programs and services that enrich the lives of children and adults. Even among all-star guests, our students and their incredible accomplishments steal the show.
Can You Imagine?

The Viscardi Center’s President & CEO John D. Kemp has been named a 2021 Imagine Awards recipient in the Certilman Balin Adler & Hyman, LLP Leadership Excellence category! The Long Island Imagine Awards recognize innovation and leadership in the nonprofit sector.

YOUR LASTING IMPACT

Providing essential laptops for remote learners. Gathering their entire family to shop and wrap gifts for Viscardi’s Adopt-a-Family program each holiday season. Introducing friends in the community to The Viscardi Center’s life-changing services for children and adults. Over the years, John Hogan Sr., CIO of Broadridge Financial Solutions, and his wife, Shelly, have taken a proactive approach to philanthropy. They’ve also done much to instill a culture of giving within their children and grandchildren.

“Our family has a saying, ‘Do good, feel good,’ and we are grateful to have The Viscardi Center as a platform for us to live by those words and proud to be a part of an organization that has such a profound and positive impact on the community they serve,” says John Sr.

Chris Hogan joined Viscardi’s staff several years ago as an instructor in PROSPER, an attendance intervention program for at-risk youth. The program, which primarily operates in Nassau County, recently branched out to Brentwood High School in Suffolk County.

John T. Hogan, Director at Netrex Capital Markets, helped form the Viscardi Advisory Board for young professionals in 2016 and served as its first chair. Under his leadership, the VAB successfully raised funds to start the BRIDGE program for young adults with varying care needs, which promotes continued learning and skills development, and a door-widening project at the Henry Viscardi School to accommodate powerchairs of all sizes. JT currently serves as a member of the School’s Board of Trustees, and he and his wife, Nicole, serve on the Celebrity Sports Night Committee.

For the Hogans, who touch many lives through their dedication, making a lasting impact at Viscardi is truly a family affair.

Learn how you can make a lasting impact of your own. Call 516.465.1593.