

In Flight at Full Circle

By Ben Evans

Mahindra NATC was proud to award a \$5,000 grant to the Full Circle Foundation in 2015. This grant was used to build a new storage shed for the foundation's Edible Garden Program.

Despite a broad scope of programs and activities, The Full Circle Foundation has only one mission: helping young adults with disabilities realize their potential and make the transition to purposeful independent living. To this end they have, and continue to be, incredibly successful. A visit to the foundation's headquarters on Detroit's east side reveals a vibrant operations suite consisting of an upscale clothing resale business, several classrooms, a full kitchen, a commercial laundry facility, and a computer room where program enrollees sell donated luxury items on Ebay. More important, though, are the spark-eyed, smiling young adults at work in these spaces—24 of whom are Grosse Pointe schools students participating in Full Circle's Community Campus Program, in addition to 13 older students involved primarily in on-site micro-businesses. Though these young adults have been diagnosed with autism or some form of cognitive deficiency, one finds it difficult to categorize them as "disabled". Every student I encountered at Full Circle was kind, big-hearted, and uniquely gifted in one, or many, ways.

Full Circle's administrative coordinator Sue Banner helps to manage Full Circle with an enthusiasm equal to her students. Banner's philosophy—"You get the right people in the right place and the right things happen"—is evidenced throughout the organization, but nowhere more so than at the front of Full Circle's resale shop where Yarnell Waller works as a greeter radiating smiles and affirmations from his wheelchair to all who stop in. Waller is an exceptional individual by any standard, and a testament to the impact of Full Circle, "The world tends to count us out sometimes because we have a disability, they feel like we don't matter, so what I love about Full Circle is that they give us an opportunity to show the world: as young adults we have a lot to offer. Whatever disability one may have, there's still some work that you can do," says Waller. The upscale resale shop Waller mans was just the first of many enterprises that Full Circle students now operate.



Yarnell Waller greets a customer in the Full Circle store

24 year-old enrollee Byron Howard was washing tablecloths and napkins in Full Circle's commercial laundry facility when I met him. Howard, along with two other students, runs a micro-enterprise doing laundry for several prominent area businesses including some of the area's finest restaurants. Howard worked intently, but paused to shake my hand and relate that he was improving his skills every day and was on his best behavior at Full Circle, just before grinning at Banner and qualifying "Sometimes."

One of Howard's partners in the laundry enterprise, Emily Virga, was drawing in one of the classrooms when we met. After I complimented her picture, she promptly tried to sell it to me. This entrepreneurial spirit is coupled with, or stems from, Virga's exceptional creativity. Despite being involved in three distinct micro-businesses at Full Circle, Virga last year found time to craft an exquisite bench shaped like a monarch butterfly which also depicts, in panels, the insect's full life cycle. Virga created the bench for a street art project organized by the Grosse Pointe Chamber of Commerce last summer. Those benches were all auctioned off in September—many for upwards of \$5,000—with the exception of Virga's. Hers was purchased and donated back to Full Circle where it now sits outside, in stilled flight, as a perpetual reminder of nature's transformative potential.



Emily Virga's Monarch Butterfly bench

Located in Detroit, just up the street from the foundation headquarters, lay Full Circle's Edible Garden—a three acre site provided to them by Detroit's Riverview Rehabilitation Center. The site features 45 raised garden beds that sprout sunflowers, Cherokee purple tomatoes, sweet basil, bell peppers and romaine lettuce, among other flower, herb and produce varieties. Full Circle's Edible Garden functions as both a teaching tool and a small business. Students are taught how to plant, nurture, and harvest flowers and produce, much of which they sell in the community and at local farmers markets. The floral side of the operation, in particular, has flourished. Banner explains its (swift) inception: "Last year, one of our office staff happened over to the garden and started making bouquets with the kids. That turned into a floral business; we are now running a floral business."



The Edible Garden

The market for Full Circle flowers has now grown to extend beyond Grosse Pointe—they recently received a contract from Comerica Park (home of the Detroit Tigers) and regularly provide bouquets for large functions across Southeast Michigan. Though it's most profitable aspect, the value of the bouquets ranks a distant second from the garden itself. 2015 Edible Garden Coordinator Mary Allemon explains: "The students, they switch when they're at the garden, their whole mindset, they're focused. A couple students like to water, some like to weed; they find their niche and it's so cool just to see how they interact with everyone else." Like all of Full Circle, the Edible

Garden is an environment where these young adults can emerge from their cocoons and thrive.

“Never underestimate someone with special needs, or that has a learning disability, because they are one of a kind,” Allemon states. Her sentiment is echoed throughout the classrooms, small businesses, and garden of Full Circle, where, on any given day, one can witness so many butterflies in flight.

**Mahindra’s Urban Agricultural Grant Program, initiated in 2015, is committed to helping organizations like Full Circle realize positive change in and around Detroit through the growth of healthy, sustainable food. Mahindra’s urban agriculture grants are awarded annually. For more information visit [here](#).*