**Autism Initiatives (Northern Ireland)**

A new chocolate business called ‘Chocolate Memories’ has been created to provide exciting new opportunities for people with autism. It was established with a simple description of what it wants to do. ‘Here at Chocolate Memories not only do we provide training and employment opportunities for people with autism, we also hand-make some really delicious chocolates.’

The business is a smart solution for the tough times we are in. Developed by Autism Initiatives the business is an innovative project that will trade in the open market and will succeed based on its ability to generate revenue through sales.

Autism Initiatives has taken the business risk of employing a couple of members of staff to develop and manage the business. Autism Initiatives is the largest voluntary sector provider of direct social care services to people with autism in Northern Ireland. Concerned about the potential numbers of people with autism reaching young adulthood without good training opportunities, the organisation set out a social enterprise strategy.

The charity set up a company, Autism Work Ventures, with its own Board of Directors to provide the legal structure for the social enterprises and the first idea was to develop a business making and selling chocolate. A number of charities have already established coffee shops so Autism Initiatives did not want to enter this market at this time but saw the chocolate business as a complementary one. Chocolate Memories is busy negotiating supplier deals with these Coffee Shops to get their chocolates on these counters!

Developing the business meant that Autism Work Ventures had to have premises with a fully equipped kitchen in order to make the chocolates and to act as a distribution centre. The chocolate concept seized the imagination of a number of people and agencies who helped out. Invest NI’s Social Entrepreneurship Programme provided help with business planning and advice and the project was also recently awarded a small grant through Invest NI.

Advice from the University of Ulster led to an Invest NI Innovation Voucher and an excellent relationship with Loughry College, who acted as a knowledge provider helping with developing chocolate product and processes. Most importantly the Lagan Rural Partnership’s Rural Development Programme has provided capital and marketing funding to enable Chocolate Memories to be open for business from the chocolate factory in Moneyreagh!

The mix of support from the Rural Development Programme, Invest NI, the Social Entrepreneurship programme and others has been instrumental in getting the business off the ground. Business in the Community’s Pro Help initiative also helped by finding a brilliant design company Paperjam Designs based in the Cathedral Quarter who have provided thousands of pounds of invaluable high quality brand development and
packaging design. Linda Beers of INFORM Communications has also provided enormous support with Public Relations advice and assistance.

Developing the business has been very hard work but the purpose of the business is to provide opportunities for people with autism and over 20 people with autism have had the opportunity of trying chocolate making to see if they like it by travelling to Loughry College to take part in workshops. From this group 7 people will now be taking part in the activities of the business on a regular basis.

While Chocolate Memories have had the support of many people and organisations it will survive or not based on its performance in the market. Chocolate Memories receives no revenue funding of any kind – one of very few similar social economy organisations. Chocolate Memories supply conferences, corporate events and weddings. They also have a range of boxes and bars of chocolates that make a perfect gift.

Contact Details:

Address: Office 1&2 Linden House, Beechill Business Park, 96 Beechill Road, Newtownbreda, Belfast, BT8 7QN

More information about Autism Initiatives is available at: www.ai-ni.co.uk