

GROWING PLANTS & BLOSSOMING SKILLS

Melwood's Horticultural Training Center puts people with differing abilities to work growing plants and maintaining grounds for the John F. Kennedy Center

BY CHRISTINE MCLAUGHLIN

Photos courtesy of Melwood.

It all started in 1963. For the love of their children with differing abilities, a group of parents got together with one goal in mind: for their six kids to have a meaningful life beyond high school. As a way to meet that end, the parents were inspired by the idea of creating a program to train adolescents and young adults in horticultural activities. At the time, it was an idea that broke new ground — employing people with disabilities, who at the time were considered by many to be untrainable and unemployable.

But, the idea soon became a reality as the parents persuaded the Federal Government to donate seven acres of land in Upper Marlboro, Md.; the new horticultural training program was born and named Melwood, which means “beautiful woods” (the geographic region that dates to the George Washington era when it was spelled Mellwood). Initially, the agency’s participants started growing mums. Soon after, the number of Melwood employees (mostly adolescents and young adults) with disabilities grew, and so did its services. The organization became an AbilityOne® nonprofit agency and began acquiring contracts for landscaping and groundskeeping.

In the meantime, Melwood became known for its “social-entrepreneurial” business model of generating revenue while contributing to society by providing jobs and independence for people with differing abilities.

Melwood gardening crews soon raised more plants and sold them at work sites around the Washington, D.C. area. Melwood crews earned high marks for their reliable and respected work.

As the novel program’s popularity grew, so did the skills and popularity of one of the original six participants in the Melwood agency, Robert “Bobby” Dove. His bubbly personality helped him become the face of the young organization. And in 1968, when the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts was under construction in Washington, D.C., the greenhouse operation caught the attention of Eunice Kennedy Shriver. Before the building’s official opening in 1970, Shriver invited Dove and his coworkers to beautify the area with the plants they grew, and the relationship continues to this day—44 years later.



Kennedy Center River Terrace looking toward Georgetown.

CULTIVATING THE PLANTS

Now, the Melwood Horticultural Training Center grows pansies, geraniums, black-eyed Susans and mums — via its three greenhouses and abutting fields. All are planted by Melwood's AbilityOne grounds crew at the Kennedy Center which is situated on 17 acres overlooking the Potomac River in Washington, D.C. The Center attracts more than 4 million visitors each year through its performances and special events. Every weekday, through the Melwood's Crossroads Day program, individuals with varying abilities come to Upper Marlboro to work or participate in activities and outings. Some of the work includes washing the flowerpots, filling the pot with soil, planting the plug (a small plant about the size of a quarter), putting the plant tag in the pot, and growing it with water and fertilization.

"It's a big team effort, which is very therapeutic... and develops fine and gross motor skills... [They are] watering plants, taking off the dead flowers and dead leaves, and propagating plants and doing stem cuttings or root division to make more plants," said Sheila Gallagher, HTR (registered horticultural therapist),

CPH (certified professional horticulturalist), master gardener and program director of horticultural therapy at Melwood.

The materials are planted months before they are ready for sale. In the spring, the horticultural program participants travel to plant sales at places like the Washington National Cathedral and the National Arboretum in Washington, D.C., as well as local farmers' markets to sell their homegrown products. In the process, the individuals acquire valuable social and



Melwood grounds worker with new stock of black-eyed Susan plants ready for installation.



Top row, left to right, Marcus Williams, Juan Hernandez, Earl Jordan, Tulio Sigaran, Brenda Patterson; Bottom row, left to right, Kevin Garrison, Crystal Minor





Crystal Minor, Melwood grounds worker preparing for trimming duties.

work skills, as well as learn more about the plants when customers ask them and their supervisors about the different types at plant sales.

“What I see when someone becomes involved in our program is that their self-esteem increases because they see the plant they’ve grown and its value when we go out and sell it. Once you’ve increased self-esteem, other good things start to happen: social interactions are going to be improved as well as [their] health and well-being,” says Gallagher. “And [they are] going to want to do more and learn more.”

SHOWSTOPPERS AT THE KENNEDY CENTER

At the Kennedy Center, the plants that Melwood employees grow are immediately put to use by a lead worker, a gardener and three grounds workers. One of those hard-working and outgoing grounds crew members is Crystal Minor, who has been with Melwood for three years and says she is thrilled that she has this opportunity as her first job. Minor is responsible for a morning clean up that involves removing debris like dead leaves and stick stems around the Kennedy Center, as well as various duties throughout the day, including weeding, pruning, edging and planting.

In fact, she often receives praise from Kennedy Center staff and other contractors about how nice the plantings and landscape look. “I get a lot of compliments,” says Minor, smiling.

Brenda Patterson knows why. As the landscape operations manager at Melwood, she is responsible for 15 properties, including the Kennedy Center. Patterson explains that Minor and her coworkers are dedicated to doing a good job. They are responsible for cutting the grass and general maintenance, as



Melwood employee Bobby Dove with Eunice Kennedy at the Kennedy Center.

well as performing seasonal flower rotations, daily weeding and monthly assignments like hedge trimming, tree pruning and mulching the flower beds. She says that their hard work “speaks for itself” considering how immaculate the Kennedy Center looks.

In fact, she adds, “The Kennedy Center president recently went out of his way to personally compliment Crystal, acknowledging how she stood out to him because of her hard work and what a great job she and the Melwood crew do in keeping the grounds so beautiful!”

In addition, the landscaping crew members regularly receive on-the-job training to inspire them to continually improve. “I get a lot of training and build up my skills each day so I can do more,” says Minor. “I challenge myself every day... by pushing myself to do more. Be a little quicker... a little faster.”

Minor works full time every weekday through the well-known heat and humidity of the Washington summer and the sometimes-bitter cold of winter. But she’s not complaining. “I love my job,” she says. “It’s a privilege to work at the Kennedy Center.”

The tradition continues... ★