

# Whit's Custard Hires Teens With Challenges

by Maggie Kell

Whit's is a team," says David Berlin, owner of the small custard shop near Baxter Village. "There's nobody who's too big for the team and nobody too small."

Small in stature, David wears a tie-dyed Whit's shirt with pride, his salt and pepper hair sticking out from a pale yellow cap.

His son Harrison, who is part of the Whit's team, is on the autism spectrum. Harrison is taller, paler and has darker hair. He wears the same tie-dyed shirt with athletic shorts.

"I work six days a week," explains Harrison. "On average I work over 10 hours a day. I'm working 65-75 hours a week. On most days, I get here at 7:15 a.m. and I don't leave till 10 p.m.."

When Harrison finished high school, he tried community college but realized it wasn't for him. That realization led the family to move to Asheville, NC.

"When we moved to Asheville we looked into vocational rehabilitation," says David. "They paired Harrison up with a job coach who helped him go through the interview process and helped him get a job at [Ingles] grocery store."

Harrison had tremendous success working at the grocery, which gave the Berlin's the idea of looking for employees beyond the traditional job pool after the move to Fort Mill. When settling down at Whit's, the team of two went to vocational rehabilitation for personnel to hire.

"Out of my 14 employees, three employees are on the autistic spectrum," David said. "Once they get a task down, they're pretty good at doing it. For high functioning autistic people, structure is a big thing. If you can create a structure, then they will pick that



Scooping frozen custard at Whit's Harrison Berlin fills orders for customers on Sept. 18. Berlin worked his way up to become a manager at the store.

up and follow the structure a lot better than those who are not on the spectrum. It worked out really well for Whit's."

Whit's custard shop smells sweet - chocolate, vanilla, s'mores, key lime pie, strawberry shortcake custard

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~ David Berlin

scents fill the air and blend with the whir and buzzing of custard machines.

Harrison wasn't extremely excited about working at Whit's, but explains he wouldn't want to be working anywhere else.

"I'm the type of person that if it

were up to me, I wouldn't be working anywhere," explains Harrison. "I could work as hard as I want in some companies, and I can only go so far. Here I can go as far as the success of the business goes."

Zach Chambers (20) says he enjoys working at Whit's with Harrison. Chambers works there because of the people and the environment.

"There's so many families, and I wanted a family-oriented place where people could come and bring their kids and feel comfortable in this environment," David explains. "I didn't want to be in a place where there was a lot of drinking going on or entertainment that is geared more towards adults."

He likes working with his own family as well. David admits Harrison has taught him a lot of patience.

"As a parent of someone with autism, I must have a high tolerance for frustration," he explains. "My son has very little tolerance. We all struggle with it. In a lot of cases, we [those not on the spectrum] have the tools to deal with frustration. We can compartmentalize it. However, I've realized that every problem has a solution."

David says nobody will meet anyone like his son. He hires a lot of employees from all three high schools in the Fort Mill district.

"Harrison can relate to the employees better as he is the same age as them," David explains. "He can agree with them on the same maturity level. He finds the common ground. We must work together as a team. I want everyone to be treated with respect. We all have different levels of abilities."

David believes in everyone. After becoming a father, he says has learned a lot from Harrison.

"This is not brain surgery," says Berlin. "It's a custard shop, and we are going to have a good time. We are going to put out a good product."