



Downlights

BREAKING BARRIERS WINNER

[WATCH
VIDEO](#)



THE STORY

What began as a business with the primary purpose of generating employment for one person, has transformed into a workplace that embraces the needs of a broad and diverse range of employees.

After completing her final year at Sommerville Special School Emma Sykes, who has Down syndrome, started looking for work with the help of her father, Tony. They were turned down by every business they applied to.

Tony's desire for his daughter to have a fulfilling life led to the idea of Emma making candles as a hobby. He sought the help of Jennifer Del Bel from Illumina Soy Candles, who had six years of experience in the industry.

From that connection, Downlights began. In 2018 it merged with Jennifer's business, Illumina and is now a successful and rapidly expanding environmentally conscious candle-making business, where the entire manufacturing process supports the development of workplace skills for young adults with Down Syndrome and learning disabilities.

In 2020 Downlights established Downlights Charitable Trust and \$1 from every candle is donated to the New Zealand Down Syndrome Association and Recreate NZ.

With a turnover of \$120,000 in the first year, Downlights had to quickly expand to meet the demand of the market. A range of products are sold through retailers, online, at markets and pop-up as well as to corporates, social partnerships and to schools and clubs for fundraising purposes.

As Managing Director, Jennifer dedicates a significant portion of her day to supporting employees and trainees to set their own professional and development goals, and providing instruction and tasks within the candle-making line.

Emma was joined at Downlights by her sister Nicki, who also has Down syndrome. They are both shareholders of the business. Downlights also works in collaboration with MOXIE (Meaningful Opportunities X-ing Into Employment) to create a tailored work experience programme for other young people.

Since early 2019, the Moxie team has visited Downlights every Tuesday for four hours of work experience. A team of four people with disabilities learn new skills every week to help build their confidence, and their resumes, in an effort to assist them on their journey to positive employment.

In early 2020, Downlights offered their first work experience graduate a part-time position and hope to be able create more opportunities in the future.

Jennifer says while the Downlights team is proud to be able to support people with disabilities into employment, embracing diversity brings many opportunities to the business.

“Though our team is small, we all benefit from having a diverse workforce. It doesn’t matter if you’re in management, or operational and hand-pouring the candles. We are a team who works together, and who embraces and celebrates diversity. This is our greatest strength. Our business reflects the diversity of the customers who buy our candles,” she says.

While the Covid-19 pandemic had a significant impact on sales, the Downlights team was encouraged to see business pick up quickly following lockdown.

Director of Marketing, PR and Partnerships Amanda Jordan says, “To go from a long list of rejections and Emma making candles as a hobby, to now creating a professional and inclusive workplace where people with and without disabilities can work equally, side-by-side, is simply incredible. In just two years, what started as one young person’s hobby has transformed into a successful business that provides training and employment to more than seven individuals. What more can we achieve in five or 10 years?”

“We are a team who works together, and who embraces and celebrates diversity. This is our greatest strength. Our business reflects the diversity of the customers who buy our candles.”

THE CHALLENGE

After finishing school, Emma Sykes, who has Down syndrome, struggled to find work. She started making candles as a hobby, but she and her family were keen to take it to the next level.

STRATEGIES FOR SUCCESS

- With his daughter making candles as a hobby, Tony Sykes sought the help of Jennifer Del Bel from Illumina Soy Candles.
- Downlights merged with Illumina, acquiring six years of IP, contacts, existing retail contracts, existing contract manufacturing work, and suppliers.
- Emma was joined in the business by her sister Nicki, who also has Down syndrome, and media attention helped raise the profile of the business.
- In collaboration with MOXIE (Meaningful Opportunities X-ing Into Employment), Downlights created a tailored work experience programme for other young people with disabilities.

RESULTS AND BENEFITS

- What started as a hobby has grown into a social enterprise providing pathways into work for young people with disabilities.
- In its first year, Downlights had a turnover of \$120,000.
- Candles are available in 65 retail stores across New Zealand and also sold online, at markets and through fundraisers.



KEY LEARNING

An idea that originates to fill one person's needs had the potential to grow and provide opportunities and employment for a diverse range of employees.

DO WORKPLACE DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION WELL AND DO WELL BECAUSE OF IT.

Visit diversityworks.nz or call 0800 DIVERSITY (0800 348 377)