

by **Kim Spinelli**



With April being Autism Awareness and Acceptance Month, this issue of the *Gazette's* "Giving Back to GSAPP" series spotlight is on John Vaccaro, an invaluable supporter of the [Rutgers Center for Adult Autism Services \(RCAAS\)](#). John is President of [Bettaway Supply Chain Services](#), headquartered in South Plainfield, New Jersey, and founder of [PalletTrader](#). Recently, **Kim Spinelli** (Director of Communications) and **Catherine Emery** (Associate Director of Development) sat down with John for an important conversation. A summary is excerpted below.

## Background

John and his wife, Laura, are the devoted parents of a son, Frank, 26, who is on the autism spectrum. Like most parents of adult children with ASD, they spent countless hours in worried discussion about what Frankie's daily life would look like after turning 21. Places to turn for impactful support services that would enable Frankie to realize his full potential were, and are, hard to come by. The Vaccaros found this to be true in their native Staten Island and relocated to central New Jersey purposely to enroll Frank at the RCAAS; he officially entered the program in March 2018. Prior to that, Frank worked intermittently at Bettaway, with Laura serving as his informal supervisor and job coach; however, the couple concluded that this was not a viable long-term solution. Today, Frank remains a thriving participant in the RCAAS-Supporting Community Access through Leisure and Employment ([SCALE](#)) Program. He has worked at the [Rutgers University Libraries](#) and is currently employed by [Rutgers Dining Services](#) at Red Pine Pizza in the Douglass Student Center.

## Q. What brought you to the RCAAS?

**A.** Funny story, says John. I was familiar with Rutgers due to my association with Rutgers Business School's Supply Chain Management program. Laura saw an article about the planning and development of the RCAAS, and asked, "Why don't you know about this?" I then made it my duty to find out. As we know, finding the right department at Rutgers can be challenging. Eventually, I connected with **Lara (Delmolino Gatley)** at the [DDDC](#), to discuss our company's employment goals for the autism community and, subsequently, Bettaway literally and figuratively opened its doors to job sampling for a small group of participants. Lara then connected me with **Christopher (Manente)**. That put me on the right course, and the rest is history. We have and continue to conduct job sampling with adults on the autism spectrum from both GSAPP centers.

## GIVING BACK TO GSAPP (CONT'D)

**Q. As a business leader, what has been your observation and experience with autistic employees?**

**A.** It is a mutually beneficial relationship. We need employees who take pride in their work, and most adults with ASD want what we all want – the opportunity to go to a meaningful job, put in a hard day's work, and be part of an engaged community. My employees have benefited as well. Our organization and staff have gained a better understanding of autism spectrum disorder through daily interactions with these eager workers. In addition, our workplace benefits by employing reliable workers who quickly meld into our culture of inclusivity.

**Q. Over the years, you have holistically and continuously supported the RCAAS, funding staff uniforms, the community center building, and more. Considered an essential service during the global pandemic, Bettaway remained open. Again, you welcomed RCAAS-SCALE Participants whose daily and weekly routines were drastically altered. Can you speak to that aspect of your philanthropy?**



**A.** Individuals on the autism spectrum offer tremendous value to the workforce. Happy to do it, to be in a position to help and drive change.

SCALE Program Director, **Dr. James (Jim) Maraventano** added, *"John is a true champion of the RCAAS. He was instrumental in ensuring that the RCAAS-SCALE Program was able to continue providing services to our participants. He offered employment opportunities to all RCAAS-SCALE Participants who were comfortable returning to work, shortly after the COVID-19 pandemic shut down university-based operations and employment opportunities. As a result, numerous RCAAS-SCALE Participants were able to remain meaningfully and gainfully employed in community-based settings and able to continue their growth and development towards the aim of increased independence in adulthood."*

## GIVING BACK TO GSAPP (CONT'D)

**Q. If someone is interested in supporting individuals with autism, particularly adults with ASD, how would you describe the RCAAS when encouraging others to give; in other words, what sets them apart?**

**A.** The fact that the RCAAS is part of a world-class university gave me the confidence to know that it is sustainable. It has the resources and reputation of Rutgers, its campus and support network behind it. Unfortunately, due to lack of funding, resources and training, many programs only offer broad brush services for adults of all ages with a variety of special needs, whereas the RCAAS support programs are tailored to each individual. The staff want to be there and enter this field to give back and because they believe in the mission. The RCAAS has provided Frankie with job training, employment, and social growth opportunities on a welcoming college campus. Our family is blessed to be involved in such a groundbreaking program that has enriched our son's life while creating the model to help future generations of adults on the spectrum.



***Thank you, John. We are truly grateful.***

John and his family's generosity was commemorated with the naming of the Vaccaro Family Living Room in the RCAAS Community Center at the Holiday Party and Dedication in December 2023.



To make a contribution to the RCAAS, please:

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