

‘Embracing change, growth, challenge, work-life balance, teamwork and true diversity’ Forward Greens, a Vancouver-area cosmopolitan farm, is ‘the epitome of an inclusive employer’ with the help of Trillium Employment Services

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When Forward Greens’ (previously known as West Village Farms) Founder Ken Kaneko first started the indoor vertical farm in east Vancouver back in 2017, he had no idea that there was a nonprofit organization in the Clark County area that worked with businesses to integrate people with intellectual disabilities into the workforce. It was by chance that the organization – Trillium Employment Services – reached out to Kaneko this past January to see if the company was interested in the idea of supported employment.

“Forward Greens is such a great Trillium partner and inclusive employer,” said Donna Gunnels, a senior employment consultant with Trillium. “They were very open to the idea of supported employment when I first contacted them around last January. They’ve (since then) hired three individuals, and job coaching looks different for all three.”

According to the nonprofit’s website, Trillium has been serving people with disabilities and Washington state employers since 1983. The organization connects people with disabilities to employment opportunities, and the organization’s mission is “to promote inclusive community and employment opportunities.” The staff at Trillium work closely with area businesses and applicants to ensure a quality match and long-term success.

“We need to have a local workforce given that we’re producing year-round,” Kaneko said. “We search for local talent, and it was by chance that we found Trillium. They specifically try to place individuals with developmental disabilities and they go through coaching support, try to figure out what jobs match well with the individual and the employer, and during the first few weeks they come almost every day to coach and help to manage any anxieties or issues the individual may be experiencing in the workplace. Overtime, as the employee(s) gain more confidence, they start backing off of the coaching part a bit, but they’re always there to help if needed.”

Kaneko said that Trillium has helped his company source and hire three additional employees over the past 8-10 months, the first being Connor Finerty, who was introduced to the Forward Greens’ team back in April.

“It’s really hard to find good employees, especially during a time when a lot of people are kind of afraid to go out, etc.,” Kaneko said. “What Trillium has done has been great. Donna (Gunnels), who is kind of our ‘job coach’ assigned to us, she has been a tremendous help. It has been awesome.”

Gunnels said that the Forward Greens’ team worked with Trillium to be intentional about not creating a divisive or segregated environment, and each support employee that was hired through Trillium works different days, different shifts and in different roles alongside their co-workers. She said the management team has been outstanding in communication and brainstorming opportunities for growth for each employee.



Morning meetings at Forward Greens consist not only of morning attendance, but also a chance for employees to provide feedback on how they could improve the process of different jobs. Courtesy of Forward Greens

“Any hiccups have been worked on in a genuine and customized way, and they have been consistently open to learning more about not only each individual, but developmental disabilities in general and how hiring a diverse workforce creates innovative ways to achieve success,” Gunnels said. “This includes customized tools and tasks for each individual.”

“In addition, two of the three supported employees hired since June have increased weekly hours, one has made Employee of the Month, one has received a substantial raise, two have appeared in media spots and one will be appearing alongside Ken for a remote advocacy event,” Gunnels said.

Kaneko said the staff at Trillium really take the time to find the right fit for both the employee and the employer.

“It’s really all about fit, and how Trillium and Forward Greens work together,” Kaneko said. “Donna didn’t just bring in a deck of resumes – she came and walked all around our facility, looked around and really got a feel for the place. Then she goes back and does some thinking and then really sourced which of the pool of employees at Trillium are going to be the best fit.”

Currently, Kaneko said Forward Greens has a total of around 12 employees. Looking into the future, he said the business is looking to have some significant expansion. Forward Greens is currently in stores such as Whole Foods, New Seasons and Chuck’s Produce, and Kaneko said there are some markets in the larger Seattle area that they are looking into and they are hoping to make a big push into some larger customer bases in the next few months.

“Forward Greens is the epitome of an inclusive employer,” Gunnels said. “They embrace change, growth, challenge, work-life balance, teamwork and true diversity, which includes our very capable community members who just happen to experience a disability.”

To learn more about Forward Greens, visit forwardgreens.com. To learn more about Trillium Employment Services, visit trillium.org.



Left: Forward Greens Founder Ken Kaneko. Right: Connor Finerty, one of three employees that Forward Greens hired through Trillium, was named Employee of the Month with the company. Courtesy of Forward Greens