



All you need is **Luv**

By Tiffany Parnell



Michael Kessarlis works with his mother, Lisa Liberatore, MD, and Chef Sarah Chaminade in the Luv Michael kitchen.

Young adults with autism face high rates of unemployment and underemployment. Through Luv Michael, Lisa Liberatore, MD, is determined to reverse this troubling trend.

Chef Sarah Chaminade and Michael Kessarlis



Dr. Liberatore is intimately familiar with the challenges facing young adults on the autism spectrum. Her son, Michael, was diagnosed with autism when he was 2 years old. As Michael, now 19, entered young adulthood, Dr. Liberatore became worried about his future.

“I noticed that as these kids entered their high school years, teachers placed less emphasis on their academic studies,” Dr. Liberatore said. “Their schools also paid little attention to what their vocations would be, or to their interests and abilities.”

Dr. Liberatore, an otolaryngologist at Northwell Health’s New York Head and Neck Institute, considered Michael’s interests and skills. His knack for cooking and involvement in the family’s church, preparing food for events and festivals, made culinary school a viable option. But none of the local schools had the expertise to work with people on the autism spectrum.

Forging their own path

To meet her son’s needs, Dr. Liberatore developed a vocational program dedicated solely to educating and employing young adults like Michael.

Dr. Liberatore and her husband, Dimitri Kessarlis, MD, transformed their kitchen into a commercial kitchen and hired a professional chef to work with Michael two days a week. As Michael worked toward becoming a prep chef, Dr. Liberatore started Luv Michael, a nonprofit vocational organization that offers culinary, sales and life-skills training and employs young adults with autism.

Sowing the seeds of knowledge

With the help of a local culinary school, Drs. Liberatore and Kessarlis developed a 10-step recipe for homemade, organic granola. Before long, they had their first buyer: Manhattan-based fresh&co, which sells 2-ounce bags of Luv Michael granola in its 17 locations.



People with autism spectrum disorders have tremendous abilities. With opportunities and a supportive environment, the sky's the limit.”

— Lisa Liberatore, MD, founder of Luv Michael

As the business grew, Luv Michael moved from the family kitchen to a commercial kitchen at Entrepreneur Space in Long Island City. The team has grown to include a culinary educator, kitchen manager, special educator and two mentors/teaching assistants who recently graduated from Nassau Community College. Three employable adults with autism, including Michael, currently participate in the program. The team produces 120 pounds of granola each week for fresh&co stores. In addition, Luv Michael sells granola at 13 Starbucks locations in Queens and six Wild By Nature stores.

Along with producing granola, the Luv Michael curriculum helps students earn a New York State food handler's license.

“What differentiates Luv Michael from other vocational programs I've visited is education, which is very important to me,” Dr. Liberatore said. “Our students learn not only how to make granola but also how to interact with customers and work on their communication, data entry and financial skills.”

As Luv Michael expands, the Liberatore and Kessarlis family plans to open a permanent kitchen in Manhasset. Once established, Dr. Liberatore believes they'll offer two versions of the curriculum. The Luv Michael Intensive will serve up to eight students who attend class from 8 a.m. to 3 p.m. five days a week. An accelerated Granola Training Program will offer afternoon classes from 4 to 7 p.m. All lessons are recorded, with an end goal of creating a reproducible curriculum that the Liberatore and Kessarlis family can bring to communities throughout the country.

“My vision is to create a replicable model, so parents don't have to reinvent the wheel,” Dr. Liberatore said. “We've been approached by parents in the boroughs, as well as by groups from California, Connecticut and New Jersey. By giving families who are dealing with the same challenges of finding employment for children who have aged out of the school system an opportunity to open a Luv Michael chapter in their community, we can help provide meaningful employment for all adults with special needs.” ▾

Made with Luv

The name “Luv Michael” comes from the Liberatore and Kessarlis family's desire to teach Michael the concept of making something for others to enjoy. Many people with autism have food allergies and sensitivities to gluten, so Luv Michael developed Originola Granola, which is free of gluten and nuts.