

Sunflower Bakery is on a mission. They are a non-profit organization that combines skills training with actual work experience to prepare individuals with developmental or other cognitive disabilities for employment in baking and related food industries. They work alongside adult volunteers and staff, who do not have disabilities, to better simulate a typical bakery experience.

Sara Portman Milner, who co-founded the Sunflower Bakery in 2009 with Laurie Wexler, says, “I am providing real work opportunities for people with learning disabilities. For people who try and fail so much, when they succeed it’s awesome.” Wexler loves finding out what each person is really good at and helping them get stronger. The students gain self-esteem and learn skills transferable to other jobs once they leave the Sunflower program. Wexler also loves seeing the “friendships that develop among our students.” For people whose learning differences often keep them isolated, those friendships are a huge, and often unexpected, bonus of their time at Sunflower.



SARA PORTMAN MILNER, CO-FOUNDER OF SUNFLOWER BAKERY

Located in Gaithersburg, MD, Sunflower Bakery isn’t just about the food - muffins, bars, cookies, cakes, pies and cupcakes — it’s about improving the regional quality of life. Sunflower Bakery provides formal instruction and hands-on training focused on techniques and methods including measurements, ingredients and, and use of equipment to young adults with learning differences. Sunflower Bakery’s second location, **Café Sunflower**, in Rockville, MD, offers training in customer service skills and business operations. Once training at Café Sunflower has been successfully completed, individuals are hired for 6 months of paid employment working and improving on the skills and knowledge learned during training. In the last 3 months of employment, Sunflower works with employees on their resume and job search skills, helping to put them on the path to employment.

New in 2019, Sunflower has created an after-school program called ASTEP (After-School Teen Exposure Program) for high school students with learning disabilities such as ADHD, high-functioning autism or Asperger Syndrome. Students get to experience baking in a professional kitchen while learning basic baking skills, safe food handling, and kitchen safety.

Sunflower Bakery is the only program in Maryland that trains young adults with learning differences for job success in pastry arts, baking and related food industries. They are proud to have served more than 210 students, staff and teens at Sunflower Bakery and Café Sunflower.