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Leigh Corrigan and Chris Rockwell hold bags of Waggies dog biscuits.

Going to the Dogs

This nonprofit provides biscuits to canines and meaningful employment to people with intellectual disabilities

By Larry Nagengast photos by Tim Hawk

Never to be confused with Alpo or Iams, Waggies by Maggie & Friends may be small, but it is Delaware's own dog-biscuit manufacturer.

Thanks to strong community support and a small corps of dedicated volunteers, the nonprofit is now five years old, baking about 2,000 bone-shaped biscuits a day in two church kitchens in Brandywine Hundred, and providing meaningful employment to 11 young men and women who have intellectual disabilities.

"Call it luck, serendipity, whatever," says Mary Ann Nolan, president of the nonprofit organization that she and her friend Leigh Corrigan started in 2007 when they realized how weak the job prospects were for their 21-year-old daughters and others like them.

"We knew that people with intellectual disabilities could be good employees. They have talent, they can learn. They need support," Nolan says.

Nolan and Corrigan decided to create a program that involved making something that could easily be sold.

The product selection was easy. "Dog owners are generally nice people. They like to talk about their pets. They indulge them," Nolan says. "So we decided to do dog biscuits."

The women got a recipe from a friend, tweaked it a bit and baked some test batches with their daughters, Elizabeth Nolan and Maggie Corrigan.

"We keep it simple," Nolan says. "We're not fancy, but we're good."

Then they started looking for a place to do some serious baking. "I called Aldersgate [United Methodist Church]. It was a cold call," Nolan recalls, "and the church manager, Royal Lowthert, said, 'why don't you come in?'"

When the four met with Lowthert, he recalls, "They told me what they were looking for, what they wanted to do and why they wanted to do it. Nothing fancy. I took it to the church trustees and they agreed that it was a wonderful thing to do."

More cold calls and several key friendships have helped Waggies grow.



“We went out on a limb—we thought [Waggies] was a good way to develop a business for intellectually disabled adults, to help them move forward.”

— Janssen’s Market general manager Paula Janssen

One big break was an order for 120,000 biscuits, packed two to a bag, from Burns & McBride, the heating oil distributor, Nolan says.

Terry McBride, a partner in the business, learned about Waggies because he is Nolan’s neighbor. Since he has a niece with intellectual disabilities, he said he recognizes the importance of people with special needs having “meaningful employment, something they get satisfaction from.”

Burns & McBride includes a packet of biscuits with every oil delivery. “When we make a delivery, we have to leave a ticket anyway, so we attach a packet of biscuits,” McBride says. “I don’t think anything we’ve ever done has engendered more positive customer feedback. It’s tremendous how many people comment on it.”

Janssen’s Market in Greenville was one of Waggies’ first retail outlets, general manager Paula Janssen says. “We went out on a limb,” she says, because “we thought it was a good way to develop a business for intellectually disabled adults, to help them move forward.”

The biscuits, displayed at the registers near the market’s bakery, have become a popular impulse buy, she says.

Another early supporter was Apropos gift shop, also in Greenville, where both Nolan and Corrigan have been customers. “It’s the only pet food I carry,” manager Janet Jornlin says. When customers purchase Waggies, she says, “they’re doing something good for their dog and for the community.”

Employees at Apropos also volunteer to help the Waggies baking team, says Jornlin, who now serves on the organization’s board of directors.

Whether they’re baking at Aldersgate or at St. Paul’s United Methodist Church (the Waggies team uses each site two days a week), the routine for the four-hour shift is similar.

One of the 11 crew members (some work two days a week, others three, earning minimum wage for their efforts) measures the flour, pouring it from large bags into two-cup plastic containers.

The dough maker, usually Matt Montgomery, uses a spatula to scrape every bit of peanut butter out of a 40-ounce jar and drops it into a commercial-sized mixing bowl. He empties six containers of flour into the bowl, adds some baking powder and 6 ½ cups of milk, and starts the mixer spinning.

Montgomery, a Wilmington resident who studied culinary arts at Howard High School, is one of the few workers who have had outside employment. Two years ago, he says, he worked for a concession vendor at Frawley Stadium during Wilmington Blue Rocks games.

After the dough is mixed, Montgomery hands it over to one of his colleagues, who breaks off a chunk and runs it through a device that flattens the dough to the proper size for cutting.

At one table, Laura Scott, 28, of Middletown, wields a bone-shaped cookie cutter, making as many biscuits as possible from a pie-sized piece of dough. As she finishes, she places them on wax paper in a cookie sheet. Under the wax paper is a removable plastic template that shows the proper placement of nearly 100 biscuits on the sheet.

At the end of another table, Corrinne Wanamaker, 28, of Newark, carries on a non-stop conversation as she places the dough on top of an inverted fryer basket and, using a rolling pin and a small roller, pushes the dough through the grid to make half-inch cubes of “Waggiebits” kibble. “You use them when ►



Above: Maggie and Friends baker Maggie Corrigan carries a tray of Waggie dog biscuits to be baked. Right: Waggies dog biscuits are cut out for baking.

you're training your puppy," says Wanamaker, who has a basset hound and a Pekingese at home. "When they sit, you give them a treat."

Working alongside the bakers are a couple of adult volunteers. Nolan, Corrigan and Chris Rockwell are there most days, and Pat Muller is in the kitchen twice a week. They pitch in, mixing ingredients, cutting cookies and, most importantly, carrying on conversations with the bakers.

"We don't need many adults [to supervise]," Corrigan says. "The workers all know their jobs."

The only thing the paid staff doesn't do is operate the ovens. Adult volunteers put the cookie sheets in the oven and take them out a half-hour later.

While the biscuits are in the oven, the workers take their lunch break. On days that Muller is volunteering, she offers a 20-minute yoga session. "It improves their balance," she says, and relaxes back and shoulder muscles after the strain of leaning over while preparing the biscuits.

When the sheets have cooled, it's time to pack the treats—40 biscuits or 6 ounces of kibble to a brown paper bag—each one with a colorful sticker affixed to describe the product inside. Waggies come in five varieties—peanut butter, chicken and sweet potato bones (\$6 a bag) and peanut butter and chicken bits (\$5 a bag).

The treats are fine for human consumption too. "We eat them all the time," Rockwell says. (The peanut butter biscuit tastes like a crisp, unsweetened, peanut butter cookie.)

In addition to Janssen's, Waggies by Maggie are available at more than two dozen locations in and near Delaware, including veterinarians, gift shops, and—quite naturally, given its name—Black Lab Breads in Wilmington. A diner and a sub shop in Ocean City, N.J., sell them too, Nolan says. A full list of retail outlets is available at Waggies' website, waggies.org, where online orders can also be placed.

The connections made as the business grew have helped propel its growth. For example, supervisors from Burns & McBride pick up orders for supplies and deliver them to the baking sites, Nolan says. And Janssen's has helped in several ways, Paula Janssen says, first by giving technical advice on licensing the products and later by advising on the purchase of a replacement oven for the kitchen at Aldersgate.



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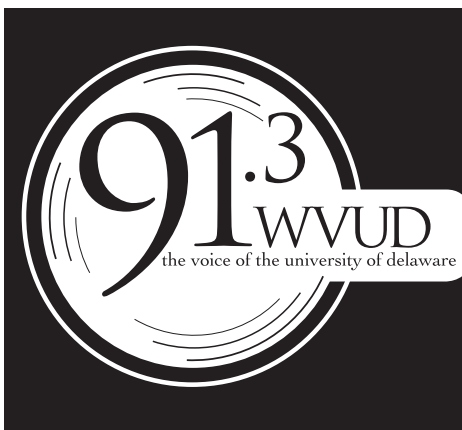
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Nolan and Corrigan are pleased with Waggies' development, and they like the size of the current operation. They would, however, like to see sales or grant revenue grow so they could pay someone to supervise the operation. Also under consideration, Nolan says, is replicating the program in another community, either in nearby Pennsylvania or Towson, Md., so adults with disabilities in those areas would have employment opportunities.

Elizabeth Nolan and Maggie Corrigan, the young women who inspired the business, are no longer part of the baking team. Elizabeth is now working in a doctor's office and Maggie does janitorial work through Easter Seals. But both come back to handle occasional shifts as volunteers.

The success of the business has made Maggie "a bit of a celebrity," her mother says, "because she's known as the Maggie in Waggies by Maggie."



Maggie and Friends baker Amy Goodzeit measures out ingredients for Waggies dog biscuits.

Made in Delaware is a new *Out & About* feature, and we're looking for topics for future articles. Send your suggestions about Delaware-made products to writer Larry Nagengast at larrynagengast@comcast.net



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