



Building skills for employment

Building skills for employment



Cakeable interns work together to learn skills in the cafe. Courtesy of Cakeable

As a former special education teacher in Charlotte, North Carolina, Renee Ratcliffe realized how students with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) didn't have a pathway to employment after high school. Her time with Kendall, a family friend with Down syndrome, inspired her and her husband, John, to open Cakeable, a nonprofit bakery that provides jobs for people with IDD.

"Renee saw the limited options for Kendall to go into workforce employment," says Meg Kelly, Cakeable's placement director since 2025. "Renee and Kendall often baked together, and Renee saw that as an employable skill."

Ratcliffe hired people with IDD such as autism, cerebral palsy, Down syndrome and spina bifida. By 2024, the idea for an internship program with a community placement process was conceived.

"As much as we wanted to keep the staff in our café and continue to see them grow," Kelly says, "it was more important for them to go out into the community and showcase their skills and highlight inclusive employment."

Workforce development

Cakeable's internship program was launched in a café in uptown Charlotte. The space serves as a training ground for about 15 interns at a time. Interns must be at least 18 years old and seeking long-term employment. They're paid employees who train for three to six months, depending on their individual needs. Cakeable serves about 30 interns a year.

Kelly matches interns and employers based on skills and interests. Companies such as Compass Group, Canteen, Marriott, The Tepper Foundation and the YMCA hire Cakeable interns for jobs as baristas, food service workers, hosts and fitness associates.

"We believe everyone has capabilities," Kelly says. "We really try to support the team and the manager because we want our interns to be independent."

'Grateful for Cakeable'

Since August 2024, Alondra Rosa has worked as a barista two days a week at the Wells Fargo coffee shop, operated by Compass Group, in Charlotte, North Carolina. The 21-year-old often makes sugar-free hazelnut lattes and watermelon refreshers for her customers.

Rosa, born with IDD, moved from Puerto Rico to Charlotte when she was 7 years old.

"I gained a lot of hard working skills," Rosa says of her experience at Cakeable. "I'd help out making the drinks of the week. I would help my coworkers. It helped me figure out how to keep busy. At Cakeable, if we didn't have many customers, the bosses would have us do different tasks, like cleaning and writing on the drink sleeves."

Rosa learned customer service skills, how to make drinks, how to process a payment at the point of sale, and clean counters and tables through the internship program.

"I wouldn't be able to get the job I have now if it weren't for Cakeable," Rosa says. "I'm so grateful for Cakeable. They've done so much for me."

About this issue: Alondra Rosa graduated from the intern program of Cakeable, a nonprofit bakery in North Carolina. Courtesy of Cakeable. Article by Vanessa Infanzon. Published nine times per year, *Elevate* is exclusively distributed to clients of Thompson Hospitality and Compass Group, both world leaders in foodservice. To contact us, send an email to marketing@thompsonhospitalityjv.com.

©2026 Thompson Hospitality and Compass Group. Produced by [Content Spectrum](https://www.content-spectrum.com).

