

Dereck Cunningham keeps giving back

Handicap? What handicap? Our hero here pushes ahead helping those with great need and paying little attention to what could be a debilitating condition of his own

By Alexandra Laing

The yearning to affect surroundings and people and places and lives is often so deeply engrained in an individual that his ambition becomes a driving force for action.

It is an ambition that overcomes the adversary of physical, emotional and financial strain and it can create an almost supernatural enabling drive.

Dereck Cunningham knows about living a dream.

He was born with Spina Bifida, a spinal cord condition affecting the mobility and use of his lower limbs.

He has walked with the aid of crutches his entire life.

Cunningham remembers about gardening as a child watching his father, but he never imagined that his childhood love would become his profession.

Today, he's co-founder, president and market manager of Lynchburg Grows, a non-profit organization based in those skills he learned from his father.

The 36-year-old Cunningham, who is in the sixth class of the Blue Ridge Business Journal's 20 Under 40, properly calls himself a farmer and "find[s] it very pleasing to be able to give back to the community."

He says, "It is difficult for people with special needs to give back [despite] a desire to be productive, [because] sometimes we have a hard time finding a way to contribute."

Lynchburg Grows has become an empowering catalyst for Cunningham and the many that volunteer and work for the

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Alexandra Lang

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organization. Helping the disabled find success in the workplace, combating the rising obesity problem, aiding the education of at-risk youth, and caring for the homeless are priorities at the fore of this organization, whose achievements are considerable.

Among the many programs that Lynchburg Grows sponsors is an at-risk mobile education program that travels around to schools; a weekly donation to the Daily Bread of the reciprocal produce not sold at Lynchburg's Farmer's Community Market held every

Saturday; and an ongoing goal to feed the homeless.

That works through a cooperative effort between St. John's Episcopal Church and Lynchburg Grows, with the dedication of an entire greenhouse's produce.

Cunningham never expected Lynchburg Grows to take off as it has.

The goal of helping a solitary elderly disabled man in 2003 to replant his destroyed garden grew into the purchase of six-

and-a-half acres of land containing nine greenhouses. It was land that had been left to ruin.

Today, Lynchburg Grows is not only helping disabled people, at-risk youth and the homeless, but it is on a path to become the biggest producer of organics in the entire mid-Atlantic region.

Lynchburg Grows sells produce locally at the Farmer's Community Market and through call-in orders with on-site pickup.

It has also provided some of Lynchburg's best restaurants with greens and vegetables. Grace Restaurant, Isabella's, Meriwether's, Vines and Bull Branch are among those regularly using Lynchburg Grows' products.

Tidy beds overflowing with succulent tomatoes, cucumbers, eggplants, basil, fennel, sesame seeds, lettuce, Swiss chard, pumpkin, a variety of squash, watermelon and corn are cultivated by Cunningham's crew.

Thanks to a man who was not deterred by hardship, Lynchburg Grows is a reality that is driven by an ambition to better this community.

(Freelance writer Alexandra Laing is recent cum laude graduate of Liberty University in elementary and secondary education. She lives in Lynchburg.)