



Inset, from left: Tom and John D'Eri

## Rising Opportunities

A BUSINESS-MINDED FAMILY'S CAR WASH CREATES JOBS FOR ADULTS WITH AUTISM

BY ALYSSA FISHER

### Paying It Forward

Rising Tide will continue to grow, but not necessarily by adding more locations. Tom and his father also have founded Rising Tide U, a service that helps people build inclusive, sustainable businesses—and not just car washes. They've taken the framework of Rising Tide and integrated it into an online course, taking "students" step-by-step through the process of launching a business that also could benefit people with autism. Visit [risingtidecarwash.com](http://risingtidecarwash.com) or [risingtideu.com](http://risingtideu.com) for information.

In 2011, Tom D'Eri was graduating from Bentley University, a highly regarded business school near Boston, thinking about what kind of career he wanted. Perhaps something related to corporate social responsibility. Or sustainability. Or social entrepreneurship.

At the same time, his father, John, a serial entrepreneur, was thinking about the future for his younger son, Andrew, who has autism. He was 21 and growing closer to aging out of school, which provided various support and services.

"My pop was like, 'Instead of going to work for a big consultancy, where maybe one day you'd get to do the type of work you want to do, why don't we try to start something for Andrew?'" Tom recalls.

"Worst-case scenario, it fails and I've got a good story to tell. Best-case scenario, it works and it can launch both my career and Andrew's, as well."

Tom and John looked at several businesses, but the idea of a car wash stood out—its well-structured and detail-oriented nature made it a good fit for most people with autism. In 2012, after months of research and training and creating a system, they bought and renovated

a struggling car wash in Parkland and turned it into Rising Tide Car Wash (7201 State Road 7), a flexible-service car wash that employs adults with autism. It went from washing about 35,000 cars a year to more than 150,000, Tom says. Last September, it expanded to Margate (2970 N. State Road 7).

"It's a great platform to talk about how capable people with autism are," Tom says. "We feel the core reason there's such high unemployment among people with autism is that we, as a society, look at autism as a disability that requires sympathy instead of a really valuable diversity."

About 80 percent of the staff is on the autism spectrum.

"It's great," Tom says, "but the total numbers of the people we're employing aren't as motivating as the individual people, trying to help them grow and become more independent."

"Something that I'm working hard on now is building character-development curriculum into our training materials: learning how to be resilient, growth in mindset. That's something that can be hard for someone with autism to understand. That's one of my big initiatives for this year."