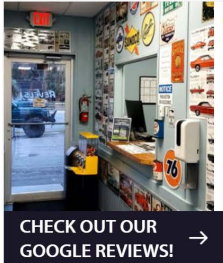


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## Arc bringing brewery to Starke

May 6, 2025 by Dan Hildebran

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The CEO of the Arc of Bradford County told two groups on Wednesday, May 1, that his organization is raising money to open a brewery at its L.M. Gaines Blvd. location within Starke's industrial park.

John Williams told a chamber of commerce group and the Starke Rotary Club that Access Brewing Co. would be a for-profit entity that would create inclusive employment opportunities for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

Williams added that the drink-in establishment would foster a community-centered environment and change perceptions about people with disabilities in the workforce.

Now, the Arc operates a woodshop at its L.M. Gaines Blvd. and State Road 100 location that produces survey stakes, pallets, picnic tables, and other products. However, the shop provides minimal interaction between the public and Arc consumers. Access Brewing Co. would enable more face-to-face contact between the brewery's patrons and Arc consumers.

"I know DEI (diversity, equity, and inclusion) is a bad word right now," Williams said. "But the reality is, The ARC is about inclusion. Our whole mission is connecting people with disabilities to the community."

During the presentation to the chamber group, Arc board member Chrissy Allen said, "Just because you have a disability does not mean that you are socially awkward...They want to contribute, and they want to do different things. So, we want to engage them and have them be in our community and serve people. They love talking and they love talking to people."

Williams said his group has moved most of its support services, like the computer lab, resource hub, food distribution, day program, and thrift store, to the former Hampton Elementary School. The group's administrative offices and woodshop remain in Starke. The Arc plans to use the administrative space for the brewery and move more offices to Hampton. The Starke location's current meeting area will be the taproom, where customers can sit down.

Williams said the brewery would not sell food but would offer delivery and invite food trucks onto the property.

## No one else is doing this

The nonprofit leader said he modeled the concept for Access Brewing on Bitty and Beau's, a coffee shop chain with locations throughout the southeast and a site in Jacksonville's San Marco neighborhood.

The chain describes itself as a human rights movement disguised as a coffee shop that employs people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. With 18 stores in 11 states, Bitty and Beau's employs over 450 people.

Williams explained to the chamber group, "I said to the board, why don't we do this? But instead of opening a coffee company, why don't we open a brewery that is mission-focused and that employs individuals with intellectual developmental disabilities? So that's what we're doing. Our tagline is 'Raise a



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Glass to Inclusion.”

Williams said Access Brewing will be the first of its kind.

“No one else is doing this,” he said. “We have the Bitty and Beau’s model, but as far as brewing goes, no one is doing this.”

Williams said two widespread misconceptions about the concept are that people with disabilities cannot work in a brewery and cannot drink alcohol.

He added that one person asked him if it was safe for his consumers to work in a brewery.

“I’m like, well, we operate a woodshop, and they’re using saws, so...”

The Arc CEO said Access Brewing has hired a brewmaster to direct the operations of the business.



Arc board member Chrissy Allen: “Just because you have a disability does not mean that you are socially awkward...They want to contribute, and they want to do different things.” Also pictured is Arc CEO John Williams.

## Must find other funding sources

Williams said the new enterprise would also help his organization meet the increasingly difficult challenges of funding The Arc of Bradford County.

“For The Arc to remain viable,” he said, “we must find other funding resources to support our mission.”

The CEO added that when he agreed to lead The Arc three years ago, the organization faced existential financial challenges.

“When I got here,” Williams recalled, “I told the board, I said, listen, I can get you through the year, I can get you through three years if we do tax credits, but we’ve got to change how we do business because we’re not going to survive as an agency if we don’t do something different.”

He added that with his agency’s reliance on Medicaid funding and the federal government’s current focus on budget cuts, finding alternative funding sources is imperative.

The non-profit is asking the public to help launch the project through a crowdfunding effort from The Arc website. Recommended donations range from \$5 to \$10,000.

He added that the goal is to raise \$150,000 over the next 60 days and to open the brewery on July 18, one day after the nonprofit’s gala.

## ‘This isn’t going to work’

Williams said The Arc has a track record of innovation and of trying new ideas that sometimes work and sometimes don’t. He added that he has a message for the naysayers, doubters, haters, and critics of the new business idea.

“We’ve been here for 50 years,” he said. “And a lot of times we are doing something new, and people tell us: ‘This isn’t going to work.’ And we’re like, ‘Well, we’re doing it anyway.’”

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