

## PEOPLE ON THE MOVE

# Horticultural program blooms under Hines' hand

BY ELLIE HENSLEY  
ehensley@bizjournals.com

**Kirk Hines**, like many people, has an issue with taking work home with him. But unlike most people, this entails loading up bonsai trees, pitcher plants, succulents and other unusual plant species into the back of his truck and hauling them home to work on them in his personal garden.

Hines is a horticultural therapist at **A.G. Rhodes Health and Rehab**'s three Atlanta locations, where he teaches group and individual sessions about plants, how to care for them, how to cook with them and how to use them for aromatherapy and simple home remedies. In addition to being a fun hobby for residents, the classes also offer many physical benefits because they involve reaching, standing, balancing and increasing sensory stimulation. There are cognitive and emotional benefits of horticultural therapy as well.

"I have seen Kirk do some amazing things with patients," said **Al Blackwelder**, CEO of A.G. Rhodes. "I've seen him with Alzheimer's patients who didn't know the names of their children, but when he worked with them they would know what direction a plant should face, toward or away from the sun, and plant names. There's something rather fundamental about our agrarian past that people with dementia hold onto things that have to do with plants longer."

One of Hines' students, Navy veteran **Murphy Brinkley**, said the sessions have given him a renewed sense of purpose.

"I was messed up," said Brinkley, who had to have his legs amputated several years ago. "I even took my psych I'd given up when they took my legs... But I got into this, and it seems like – I miss my legs, but I don't have that, I think it's pity, anymore. Now this is my baby."

Although some sessions have quite a few attendees, Hines also offers individual therapy as needed for residents. Sometimes, he says, they'll chase him down the halls when they see him because they want to spend time in the therapy garden or the greenhouse, which is wheelchair accessible.

"In a lot of health care settings people have feelings of being isolated and depressed," Hines said. "Doing things like music therapy and horticultural therapy... it gets people out of their rooms, it gets people working together and that decreases loneliness, isolation and depression."

Blackwelder said he was immediately impressed by Hines' demeanor around residents.

"To be in this business, he just has this trait – you have to love working with older people," Blackwelder said. "And his love of seniors is just so evident, it radiates from him."

**John Ables**, A.G. Rhodes' music therapist and a friend of Hines since they started working together 20 years ago, said he admires how calm and collected Hines is, no matter the situation. "He's a



Kirk Hines, right, assists Murphy Brinkley with horticultural therapy at A.G. Rhodes Health and Rehab. Hines' programs have been at the center since 2013.

BYRON E. SMALL

great speaker, he always seems so calm," Ables said. "When I give presentations, I always think I need to channel my inner Kirk."

You won't find everyday marigolds and begonias in Hines' greenhouses. He prefers to fill the spaces with unusual plants, like his rabbit ferns, which look like they are growing tarantula legs, and his Hindu rope plant, which propagates straight down in tendrils rather than out like a tree or bush.

"I don't think everything you work with has to be familiar," Hines said. "I like bringing things in that are interesting and odd and neat like our tropical pitcher plant. It's not something you see too often, and it's something our senior gardeners probably haven't worked with, yet they're just as passionate and captivated by it."

Hines has been working at A.G. Rhodes since 2013, when the horticultural therapy program at his previous workplace, Wesley Woods Center, ended. The center made arrangements with A.G. Rhodes to donate its greenhouse and all the plants. The second greenhouse he had been using, which was donated to Wesley Woods by **Emory University's** President **Jim Wagner**, also came along with Hines as he transitioned his program to A.G. Rhodes' three locations.

"They also donated funding that had

been raised for horticultural therapy so that allowed us to really get a jump start on our program here," Hines said. "Because it took me 21 years to build the program over there."

These gifts saved A.G. Rhodes money in launching its program, but transporting all of Hines' plants to their new locations was no easy task. He used his own truck to transport them one load at a time.

But this is nothing new for Hines, who has been hauling plants around his entire life. He grew up in the country, and spent lots of times playing in the woods. His great-grandparents were both avid gardeners, and he spent lots of time with them learning to identify and grow various plants. He still has several ferns that were grown by his great-grandmother.

His alma mater, **Berry College**, in Mount Berry created a horticultural therapy emphasis area just for Hines, so he could combine his loves of gardening and psychology.

One of his professors was the registered horticultural therapist at **Northwest Georgia Regional Hospital** in Rome, and another professor was a well-known researcher in the field.

"They were able to tailor my curriculum at Berry so I could have the emphasis in horticultural therapy to match some other universities," Hines said. "I'm very lucky that happened. I was the only

horticultural therapy student, and I got a lot of personal attention."

Hines later grew especially fond of bonsai trees, and has dozens of them in various growth stages at home and work.

Another calming activity for Hines is cooking. He grew up in a family that owned a restaurant in the middle of Georgia, and he knows how to cook in bulk. "I have always been drawn to food, probably a little too much," Hines said.

Blackwelder remembers one Christmas when Hines brought in a prodigious amount of "heavenly" pimiento cheese, and the residents in Hines classes eagerly await the time their tomatoes and basil are ready to harvest, so they can enjoy his homemade Caprese salad again.

After work, Hines loves nothing more than to go home and continue work on his own garden.

"You'd think he'd get burned out," Ables said. "But his garden looks good and he loves keeping it that way. He really practices what he preaches."

## ► EXECUTIVE PROFILE

If you know any executive whose hobby – or day job – is unusual enough to be in print contact Lisa R. Schoolcraft at [lschoolcraft@lschoolcraft.com](mailto:lschoolcraft@lschoolcraft.com).

## KIRK HINES

**Age:** 45

**Born in:** Griffin

**Lives in:** Tucker

**Current job:** Horticultural therapist, A.G. Rhodes Health and Rehab

**Previous job:** Horticultural therapist, Emory's Wesley Woods Center

**Education:** Bachelor's in ornamental horticulture with an emphasis of horticultural therapy, Berry College

**Hobbies:** Gardening, landscaping, cooking, bonsai trees