



Joe's Table wins CLBC award, plans expansion

By [WANDA CHOW](#)

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Jenna Christianson-Baker is the operations manager at Joe's Table café, which is being recognized by Community Living BC for its efforts to make people with developmental disabilities feel included. / MARIO BARTEL/NEWSLEADER

Peter Chung knows his late son Joseph would be pleased.

[Joe's Table coffee shop](#) opened in Burnaby's Metrotown area last year as a way to provide job opportunities for people with developmental disabilities.

Originally, it was conceived as a way to give Joseph, who was autistic and had epilepsy, a place where he could work and utilize his strengths as a people person. Peter had imagined him as a greeter.

But at age 32, Joseph died in a swimming accident in 2012 before seeing the project become a reality. Through their grief, Peter and his wife Stephanie forged ahead intent on helping other families dealing with the same challenges of finding meaningful work for their developmentally disabled adult children.

The café is at 5021 Kingsway, at Marlborough Avenue, in the same building as several private career colleges all run by the Eminata Group, of which Peter Chung is founder and executive chairman.

Joe's Table now employs nine people of whom five have developmental disabilities. One of the keys to the successful integration of the disabled staff members is their duties are tailored to their strengths, said Jenna Christianson-Barker, Joe's Table's director of operations.

Some serve customers directly, preparing coffees and food, while others focus on cleaning, stocking or other food prep work.

Of the five employees with disabilities, there has been a 100-per-cent retention rate, something quite unusual for a coffee shop, she said, adding that would be a definite economic benefit of hiring people with developmental challenges.

It does mean that the Joe's Table Society, the non-profit created to operate the business, is limited in the number of people it can help.

So it's now embarking on an expansion plan, with a goal of opening 100 coffee shops across North America within 10 years using the same hiring model focused on "visible inclusion" where people with developmental disabilities play a direct role in the community, she said. They're currently seeking a site in downtown Vancouver for their second location.

"There are opportunities out there for individuals with disabilities but a lot of them are kind of behind the scenes," Christianson-Barker said. "Obviously the most important part of our mission is direct employment but we hope through that we're also creating inclusive communities."

The society is also working with PosAbilities to create a program to give disabled clients several months of work experience at the café before they're placed with a more permanent employer.

"The real barrier is a lot of them have no work experience," Christianson-Barker explained. "We're hoping if Joe's Table is able to show and provide that real employment experience ... it'll be a breakdown of that barrier."

The back room of the café has been transformed into an art gallery featuring the work of local artists with disabilities from L'Arche, the Bethesda Parents Network and the Alternatives program at PosAbilities. On the back wall is a collection of works including several by Joseph himself.

"With artwork you see a picture, you don't see a disability," noted Christianson-Barker.

And apparently, at Joe's Table, customers don't really notice the staff members' disabilities either. The society did a survey recently which found many didn't see it being anything other than a regular coffee shop.

Christianson-Barker said that's a positive result of the venture's mission, although the society is working on rebranding the business to distinguish itself within a saturated coffee shop market dominated by Starbucks and Tim Horton's.

It plans to position itself as the socially-conscious choice where, all things being equal,

customers can help create inclusive communities through where they buy their coffee.

For Jihwan Jung, a 23-year-old Joe's Table employee with autism, the coffee shop isn't just a workplace, it's where he gets to feel a sense of belonging in the community, said Kevin Lee, his adult support worker with Burnaby Association for Community Inclusion.

Jung is often non-verbal, but he helps out with sweeping and mopping, cleaning tables, stocking supplies and putting logo stickers on pastry bags.

Lee called Joe's Table a place where Jung can "really live like a normal, regular kind of life and contribute to society."

After asking Jung how he felt about his job, Lee said, "He's got a big smile on his face, he's pretty happy."

This week, Community Living B.C. will be recognizing Peter and Stephanie Chung with a Widening Our World (WOW) award for their efforts in helping to build more inclusive communities for the adults CLBC serves.

"Community Living BC's vision for inclusive employment is that every person with a disability who wants a job is employed. Joe's Table is helping that vision become a reality," said Doug Woollard, CLBC's interim CEO, in an emailed statement.

"They are a great example of a diverse workplace, having given inclusive employment opportunities to people and helping bring awareness to the community on the positive impacts that employing people of all abilities can have."

Peter Chung said in a phone interview from Los Angeles that he gets weekly reports on how Joe's Table is doing and is "really enjoying it."

He's heartened to hear its employees are not seen as any different from others elsewhere.

"The whole point is we want to include everyone in our society and our workforce," he said. "Just because they have differing abilities there's no reason why they should be excluded."

As for the WOW award, he said he'll accept the recognition on behalf of his late son.

"I believe Joseph is doing this, it's not really me. I'm just a helping hand on the side."

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