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Joe's Table scales out, not up

As [Joe's Table Café](#) approaches its one year anniversary in Burnaby, B.C., the social enterprise has a plan to grow from one to 10 stores across the lower mainland over the next three years.

"We'd like to replicate what we're currently doing rather than create this giant organization," explains Jenna Christianson-Barker, director of operations.

"It's more of a scaling out, rather than up."

This distinction underscores the business' emphasis on remaining community-minded and responsive to communities they serve.

"That's really our vision — to create a community around inclusion," she says.

The café was founded by parents of late Joe Chung. Peter and Stephanie Chung originally envisioned creating a café where Joe could engage in meaningful employment. The young man in his early 30s loved to greet and meet new people. But because of his autism and epilepsy, fulfilling employment was hard to come by.

After Joe passed, his parents turned the initiative into a mission of creating a culture of inclusion through meaningful employment for people with cognitive disabilities.

"It's really about the jobs that are created," Jenna says. "It's also about the visibility of our employment model.

"Our customers are really getting to know our employees as real people and seeing beyond that barrier and label. As we have more locations, we're hoping to have more visibility to that idea of true inclusion," she says.

Five of the nine café staff have diverse abilities. In its single year of operation, there has been zero employee turnover.

The strong commitment of the café founders and factors like financial and community support have proven integral to the café's success.

Beginning with the Vancity credit union branch located across the street from the café in Burnaby, Joe's Table has developed a strong relationship with the credit union. Vancity funded capacity building for the café expansions and encouraged Joe's Table to apply for the Vancity Social Enterprise Portfolio Program, which provides multi-year grants and mentorship for social enterprises with potential for growth.

"We did a really good job at our first store of being as efficient as possible," Jenna says. "We aren't affiliated with any other parent organization — we're our own entity, and we're really accountable to our sales.

"We've worked really hard and we're almost there. We're at about 95 per cent of our operating costs. So we're feeling pretty good about having a model we can replicate that is sustainable," she says.

Joe's Table plans to open its second location around late summer 2014.

This story is part of an ENP-CA news inquiry on scaling up social enterprise. To learn more, click [here](#).

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Taylor, cafe barista, poses with coffee sold at the cafe. Photo credit: Vicki Marie



Joe's Table Cafe storefront in Burnaby, B.C. Photo credit: Vicki Marie