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Joe's Table a Coffee Shop with a Difference

Burnaby Café focuses on hiring people with developmental disabilities

By Kevin Griffin, Vancouver Sun June 24, 2013



Frances Cooper loves her job at Joe's Cafe in Burnaby, especially making lattes because 'they taste so awesome'. Joe's Café goes the extra distance to provide work for people with developmental disabilities.

METRO VANCOUVER -- In a region fuelled by caffeine, a coffee shop with a difference has opened on Kingsway in Burnaby.

Joe's Table Cafe was founded by Peter and Stephanie Chung in memory of their son Joseph, a 32-year-old with autism and epilepsy who died last September in a swimming accident.

The café goes the extra distance to provide work for people with developmental disabilities. Four of the café's seven employees have a disability.

"I can feel his spirit in this coffee shop because through him many other handicapped people can work here," said Joseph's mother Stephanie before Monday's official opening.

"I feel like Joseph was a little seed that has made fruit."

She said her son would have loved to be a greeter in a coffee shop. Whenever he met someone new, he would always say: “How are you? My name is Joseph. What’s your name?”

At the back of the coffee shop at 5021 Kingsway is the non-profit Joseph Chung Gallery which shows paintings, sculpture and other works by artists with developmental disabilities.

One of the employees who is benefiting from Joe’s Table is Frances Cooper. At 27, she’s working in her first job as a barista.

Since starting her training in May, she’s mastered making various kinds of coffees and making sure the cooler is full of supplies. She has also learned how to remove the garbage and sweep the floor.

The favourite part of her job? Making lattes because they “taste so awesome.”

Cooper also enjoys being around her co-workers.

“I like working here,” she said. “I like meeting new people and having fun with people who are around.”

One of the people who helped Cooper connect with Joe’s Table is Amanda Kim. She works as an employment specialist with posAbilities Association of BC, a non-profit agency that helps foster independence in the developmentally disabled.

After assessing Cooper’s skills and talents, Kim tried to find the right employer.

“That’s when I came across an ad for Joe’s Table in a newspaper before it opened,” she said. “I contacted them thinking Frances would be a great fit because she’s so social and has a bubbly personality.”

When Cooper started, Kim joined her at Joe’s Table to learn the job and help Cooper through any challenges. One thing Kim has helped Cooper with is making a chart listing how much milk is needed for steamed drinks in case she forgets.

“I’ve been working with Frances for about a month and a half,” she said. “I’m gradually ready to withdraw my support because I think she’s ready to work on her own.”

Kim remains on call for three years if Cooper needs help or if she is given more responsibilities and needs training.

Kalena Kavanaugh, posAbilities employment services manager, said the agency began focusing on employment services for people with developmental disabilities a little more than 18 months ago. Since then, six employment specialists have placed 61 people in jobs in the community.

“In our relationship with businesses such as Joe’s, we’ll go in and either learn the job and teach it to the individual or we’ll go in and work alongside the individual,” she said.

“It’s on a case-by-case basis and it’s up to the employer.”

She said posAbilities has more than 600 employees who provide a range of services for people with developmental disabilities. Its services include day programs, shared living, group homes, and behaviour consultants.