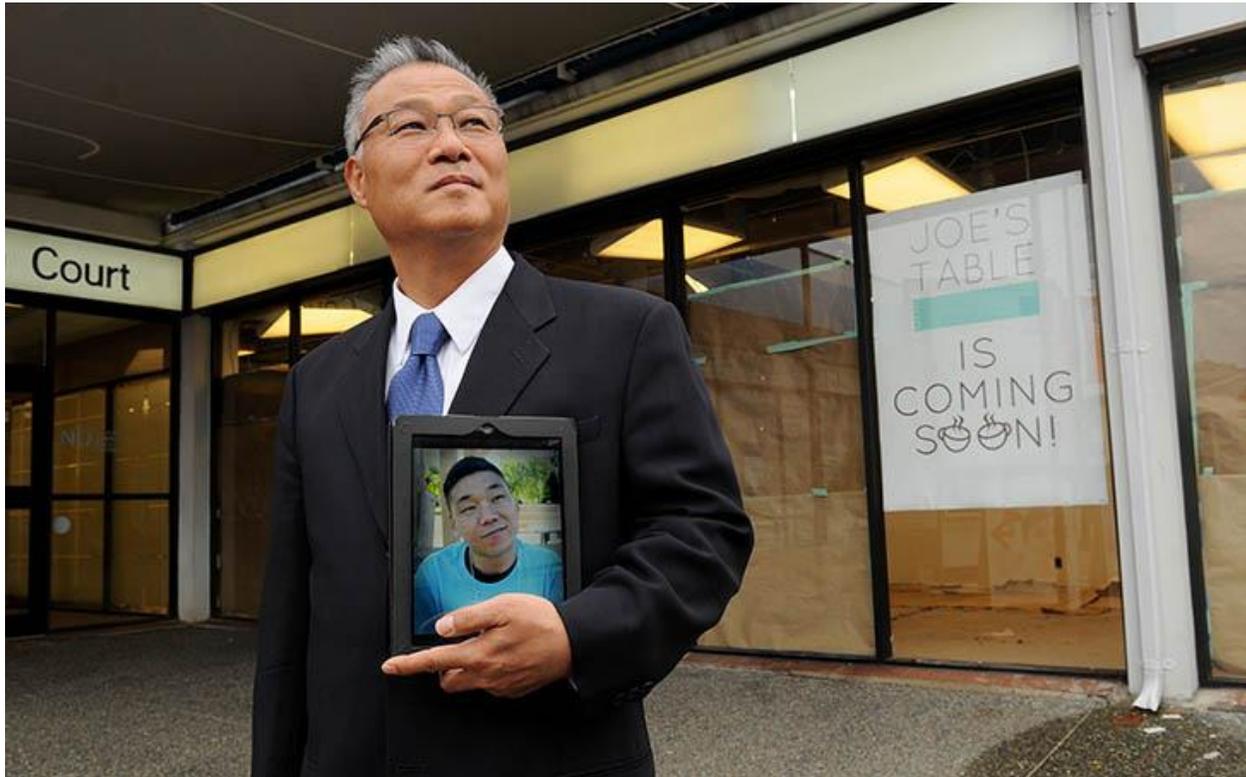


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Couple to Honour Late Son with Burnaby Coffee Shop

By Wanda Chow, Burnaby Leader Dec 4, 2012



Peter Chung is preparing to open a new coffee shop in honour of his late son Joseph, who was autistic and suffered from epilepsy. Chung is hoping to give job [opportunities](#) to other adults with developmental disabilities at the shop.

Peter Chung is asked how old his son Joseph was when he died Sept. 27 and his answer carries the heavy weight of a grieving parent: "32 years, three months and four days."

Joseph, better known as Joe, died after a swimming accident in South Surrey, when he was found in the deep end of a pool during a session with the Special Olympics training team.

He was autistic and had epilepsy and the family believe he may have suffered a seizure while in the pool.

"Unfortunately, I guess he went home early," said Peter of his son.

In their grief, Peter and his wife Stephanie continue to take inspiration from their first-born child and plan to honour him with a new coffee shop in Burnaby named Joe's Table.

The café will be in the same building at 5021 Kingsway, on the corner of Kingsway and Marlborough, as CDI College, PCU College of Holistic Medicine and Vancouver Career College, all schools run by the Eminata Group, of which Peter Chung is founder and executive chairman.

In addition to serving the staff and students in the building and beyond, the coffee shop will serve another purpose—to provide meaningful [employment](#) for people with developmental disabilities.

The Chungs saw the need through Joseph's own experience. He was somewhat independent but couldn't [work](#) alone.

"He couldn't find a job. The only job he could really apply for was janitor's assistant, working in a stockroom somewhere," said Peter. "He was very good at organizing things ... But it was contrary to his personality. He wanted to [meet people](#), greet people.

"We know there are other people like Joseph. If they try to get a job that's the sort of thing they're going to end up with."

Before he died, Joseph was working at the Eminata-owned Amenida Care Home in Surrey where he served as a letter carrier to the residents, delivering hugs and conversation along with the mail.

That job was a good fit, Peter said, and Joseph knew that the coffee shop idea was already in the works before he died.

A sort of 'coming out'

In some ways, Joe's Table is a continued coming out for Peter and Stephanie.

Joseph was the eldest of five children and he was two or three years old when Peter says he noticed his son was different. But Peter's mom reassured him that he was also hyper and slow to talk at that age too.

Then when he was four, a preschool teacher advised them to have Joseph checked by a doctor and he was diagnosed with autism.

"We were devastated. It took us a long time to overcome this thing, it was a very emotional issue."

Developmental disabilities are a difficult subject for the Asian community to talk about and carry a strong stigma, Peter said, adding that as devout Christians, their faith helped get them through it in their private lives.

Then in 2004, Stephanie, a concert [pianist](#), was interviewed by a Korean-language newspaper about an upcoming concert by a famous opera singer she was accompanying. The reporter asked Stephanie about her family and for the first time, she revealed publicly that Joseph was autistic and had epilepsy.

The newspaper ran a full-page story about Joseph and as a result, Stephanie started getting numerous phone calls from people in same situation.

She set up the Bethesda Parents Group, for parents of kids with autism and Down Syndrome, which now numbers about 40 members.

After 30 minutes together, they're like best friends, Peter said of the participants.

"They share the pain, of being ostracized by the family, they cry together and they laugh together," he said, wiping away a tear.

Since then, the participants have become more willing to bring their kids out into the community and are overcoming the sense of shame they had in their Asian culture that often caused them to hide their disabled children at home, Peter said.

Learning that so many people experienced similar challenges motivated Stephanie and Peter to do something to help.

One of the most common concerns is over how their disabled children will cope once their parents are gone, he said.

Come for quality, not sympathy

The Chungs hope Joe's Table will be part of the answer. The Bethesda group will be the first source of disabled staff for the coffee shop, but Peter said they are willing to work with other groups.

"If they fit the job description and are able to help, it's a good way to assimilate them into the mainstream [workforce]."

Peter said a non-profit society is in the process of being set up to operate the coffee shop. They expect to eventually hire 20 people and of those, about four will have developmental disabilities so they can work with the support of "mainstream staff." The staff will get extensive training and will be hired for roles that play to their strengths, he stressed.

The coffee machines were chosen for being simple to use and are being bought second-hand to be sustainable. The café will serve Belgian waffles which will be pre-cooked at the commercial kitchen at Amenida Care Home, where the coffee shop staff will also be trained.

Joe's Table is expected to open in mid-December and it will be a couple of months before staff with disabilities will be hired, trained and ready to work there.

Peter emphasized the quality of the offerings will be on par with a Starbucks or other more-established cafe.

"We don't want people to come to our coffee shop for sympathy, we want them to come for quality," Peter said.

Joe's Table also has a gallery area that will feature exhibits of artworks by seniors and people with disabilities to highlight what their abilities.

Peter hopes to eventually expand the Joe's Table concept to other buildings where Eminata's schools are located. He also wants to show other businesspeople what is possible, and inspire others to hire people with developmental disabilities.

The original intention was to have Joseph work at the coffee shop where Peter envisioned him as a greeter.

"He was an icebreaker, he could approach anybody and say, 'Hi, my name is Joseph, what is your name?' He could bring a smile to people.

"Now Joseph is not here but we still want to carry on his dream."