



David Morrison photos



## COCO CAFÉ: THE LITTLE CAFÉ THAT COULD

by David Morrison

Troubled by certain news headlines, saddened by tragedy in the lives of two friends and anxious to see the back of a personally challenging year, I slipped from 2012 into 2013 under a cloud. I was sorely in need of a tonic, some news or an experience that would warm my heart, restore some faith, and get me back on track. Just five days into the New Year, I got it.

In advance of my visit to the COCO Café in Cedar on January 5, I obviously knew what makes it special. After all, unless boasting uniqueness of general interest, it's not likely I would be reporting on an 'ordinary' café. What I did not expect when stopping by, however, was the emotional impact the place would have on me. When heading home after an hour or so in its cozy confines, I left not only with a happy belly, but reenergized, inspired, and full of hope and optimism.

A former flower shop, this lovely little corner eatery serves delicious, healthy food and beverages, as good as anything I've encountered on Vancouver Island. On this initial visit, undoubtedly the first of many, I opted for a Thai Chicken Panini with Curried Coconut Vegetable Soup,

Sticky Toffee Bread Pudding and a seasonal Peppermint Mocha. Wonderful! So, the food is great, but what is it that makes COCO Café so interesting? Well, its creation is an extraordinary story, best told by the café manager, Melanie Cadden:

"It was probably about eight years ago now. There were five families in the Cedar-Yellowpoint area who all had children with developmental disabilities. They were becoming concerned that because they were living in a rural area with rural transportation, outside a town, their kids would have a hard time staying socialized, and could become isolated once school was finished. So they wanted to create a public space where their kids could learn useful employment skills, getting socialization at the same time, and earn some money. It took about seven years of planning, hard work and dedication from the parents. A book store and other ideas were considered, but eventually they

continued on page 10

decided on a café, as that would offer constant interaction and socialization.”

COCO is an acronym of the Cedar Opportunities Cooperative, the organization of families that hatched the brilliant idea to open this café. In respect of this specific concept, establishments offering developmentally disabled individuals opportunities for empowerment seem few and far between. Three notable comparisons are the L’Arche Tova Café in Transcona, Winnipeg; the Harvest Café in Staten Island, NY, and the KJ Café, a kosher restaurant in Chicago. Nevertheless, while the idea is simple enough to translate to any community, as far as I can see the COCO Café is the first anywhere to originate directly from a cooperative of families. Cadden says it has really captured the imagination of many who envisage an equivalent in their own communities: “It’s just such an interesting concept, and we have lots of people coming in asking how we did it, what they need to do to start their own, and what could we do to help them do it. So there are these little seeds sprouting everywhere. It would be very nice to see more!”

Headed by Cadden and assisted by a few volunteers, the COCO Café team of twenty-two includes sixteen men and women with developmental disabilities. On my visit a recent addition to the crew was busying herself clearing tables, working hard under Cadden’s guidance. At this juncture it is pertinent to mention the role Cadden plays, because from what I witnessed it is difficult to picture anyone more suited to

steer this venture. In the short time I dined there, her professionalism and motivational skills shone brightly as she dished out high fives, constantly offering praise and positive reinforcement to her team. It was inspiring and heartwarming to see Cadden’s leadership in action. The result is a bustling business staffed by a motivated team with real pride in its work, consequently offering their customers superior products and a great atmosphere.

“She has just started and I made her a picture book to illustrate what her tasks are going to be,” Cadden says of the newest recruit. “We really individualize for each of our staff members, and of course it takes time to get to know them, figure out where their skills are, what they like and don’t like. We push them out of their comfort zone a little bit to help them develop, which results in them gaining confidence and a feeling of purpose, so it’s amazing to watch their growth.”

Yet it’s not all sunshine, as that ol’ green stuff that supposedly makes the world go round will always enter the equation to present challenges. “Our funding comes directly from the Vancouver Foundation,” Cadden explains. “They have been amazing, and without them we would not be here today. Last year they gave us \$75,000, but this year we get \$50,000. It’s not necessarily a funding cut, but them expecting us to become sustainable. That is of course our goal and what we’re headed towards. But it is a large chunk of money that isn’t coming in this year, so we’ve had to think of how to move forward. I really feel the

café is growing in leaps and bounds with the community’s support, so it’s a little frightening going into a new year going, okay, this is what we have to do to grow up. But we have already surpassed so many obstacles, so although it may be scary it’s totally doable.”

In response, the COCO Café has moved into other areas of service in order to generate revenue. As Cadden explains, it represents an extension of what they already do so well. “We’ve just started making frozen dinners, like turkey dinners. As we’re not open for dinners it’s not only a good way of generating revenue, but also a way of providing good dinners to people in the community that might want them, like busy working moms and elderly people who don’t have the time to cook. And then there’s our catering. We did two big Christmas parties but because of those two events we landed catering for one hundred at a fire hall and at a private home in Cedar for twenty. That was just word of mouth. Because we are ‘just’ a café people don’t realize we’re doing it.”

COCO Café is far from ‘just’ a café. It is a community hub and hopefully a blueprint for more of its kind on Vancouver Island and beyond. Like any business it faces financial and other challenges, but everything possible is being done to combat them. The hope is that a society can be formed to attain the venture charitable status. “That would be huge,” says Cadden. “So many people want to give us money because they believe in what we’re doing.” In the meantime, in terms of the invaluable life experiences offered by the COCO Café, everyone involved is already rich. “Really, what we’re getting out of it is worth a million dollars!” says Cadden. ~

*The COCO Café is situated at Suite #4A 1840 Cedar Rd., Nanaimo, and open from 7:00am to 4:00pm, Monday thru Saturday. The café can be contacted by telephoning (250) 323-2223 or emailing Melanie Cadden at [coco\\_cafe@shaw.ca](mailto:coco_cafe@shaw.ca). For further information please visit [www.facebook.com/coco.cafe.cedar](http://www.facebook.com/coco.cafe.cedar) and [www.cedaropportunities.coop](http://www.cedaropportunities.coop). The Cedar Opportunities Cooperative website provides details of how you can support the COCO Café via membership and volunteering. ~*



submitted photo