



Nick Sinacori says he's loved every single day of his job at BeanZ & Co. in Avon.



Breaking New Grounds

Connecticut Coffee Shops Serving Up So Much More Than a Cup o' Joe

By JANE LATUS / Photography by TODD FAIRCHILD

Because the CEO of an Avon advertising agency is a frequent customer of a pasta shop down the road, 24-year-old Cate Alix is one of a small percentage of people with Down Syndrome to have a job, and one that she loves, at that.

How did pasta lead to a job as office assistant at Mintz & Hoke? Well, it was all part of the plan, actually, one of several underway in Connecticut, to create jobs for young adults with disabilities.

And beyond finding jobs for this group with an unemployment rate of 80 percent, the plan is to make it an everyday occurrence for others to see them capably at work, and to make business owners realize that hiring them is profitable.

At four Connecticut coffee shops, employees on the autism spectrum, and those with Down Syndrome, traumatic brain injuries, and intellectual and developmental disabilities are serving up espressos, pastries, and awareness.

Suzanne McEnroe of Norway, in Connecticut to visit family, stopped in for a cup at Greenwich's Coffee for Good. "I love the fact that you're bringing young people into the work environment as full employees. And it works both ways – the community learns from people with disabilities. It's a two-way street."

And the sooner they are employed, the better. "The most important factor in the future success for a young adult with a disability is if they had a job in high school," says Jane Moen, founder

of The Nest Coffee House in Deep River. After that, "Your chances of finding a job get slimmer and slimmer, and there are no services to help."

But what does pasta have to do with it?

KINDNESS IS CONTAGIOUS

Kim Morrison of Avon, who with husband Scott founded the New England Pasta Company in 1994, long ago became friends with Noelle Alix of Simsbury through a support group for parents of children with Down Syndrome. Knowing the employment problem first-hand, they tackled it by opening BeanZ & Co. in 2018.

They believe it is the only for-profit inclusive coffee shop in the nation. The exact number is unknown, but there are an estimated 30-something such non-profits nationally.

BeanZ has a 50/50 employment model; for every typical employee, there is one with a disability.

By every measure, it's a success. Employees certainly are happy. Nick Sinacori, 26, has been there since day one. "When I heard about the job, I jumped at it," he says. "It's the best! I love it! It's like family." He's never had an unhappy day at work. His favorite job is running the cash register and taking orders, "because you get to see all the customers and interact with them. It makes you feel good every day." Plus, he says, "My Grandma's posse always comes in on Wednesday afternoon to visit."

Customers tell Morrison and Alix the shop has affected them. "Customers

have definitely become more patient, and kinder," says Morrison. "People tell us that being here is like a big hug."

Perhaps, best of all, is that seeing the diverse staff has prompted several customers to follow suit.

Ron Perine, Mintz & Hoke's CEO and managing principal partner, was always a patron of the New England Pasta Company, and when BeanZ opened next door, he loved its mission enough to emulate it. "We put together a job description, got together with FAVARH, and they put us together with an individual whose name we didn't know until we interviewed her. Lo and behold, it ended up being Noelle's daughter, Cate."

"She's a breath of fresh air for the agency," he says. "She's part of the team. She has a wonderful personality. She works really hard."

One selling point advocates make is that hiring people with disabilities increases customer loyalty. Perine can attest: "Yes, we go there because of the great food, but what BeanZ is about keeps us coming back."

Morrison's daughters Megan and Mollie work there. Megan has always needed to be near her parents out of medical necessity. Since infancy, she has had a trach that serves as her airway. She speaks with sign language and gestures. Except for answering the phone, she can do any job.

Megan, through sign language interpreted by her mother, jokes about how she prods regulars – using a repetitive thumbs up motion – to increase their



Megan Morrison prepares an order at Beanz & Co.



Nick Sinacori and Beanz Manager Lisa Walzak model, literally, the coffee shop's motto.

tips, but adds that one woman “tries to give too much and I have to tell her I won’t take it.”

When told she’s a favorite of Perine’s, she breaks into a grin. “He’s egg sandwiches, bacon, and a small OJ.”

BUILDING CONFIDENCE AND CHANGING LIVES

“We want to be the place where they fledge,” says Moen, executive director of the non-profit A Little Compassion, which operates The Nest Coffee House in Deep River.

Moen, too, was motivated by the lack of opportunities for her daughter. “500,000 young adults with autism and IDD will be graduating from high school within the next 10 years without a safety net. It’s a huge problem,” says Moen.

Moen’s daughter, Kaylee, 27, was lucky to get a bakery job through a high school program. “She just blossomed there.” The bakery closed, and Kaylee tried other jobs that didn’t work out – in part because a typical 8-hour shift is too much.

Moen gathered friends in 2018 to form A Little Compassion. Their original focus was social gatherings around topics like music, art, movies, and anime. They opened The Nest in 2019 with much material, labor, and volunteer support from residents and businesses. “This place was really built by the community,” says Moen. “It’s become the gathering place not just for young adults with disabilities, but a place for everybody to belong.”

Their mission is to provide employment to young people with disabilities, give them work experience, and change community perception of their ability to work.

Some employees are referred from schools, which provide transportation and job coaches. Others are supported by a grant for young adults who are too high-functioning to qualify for state services.

Twenty employees work a total of 25 hours over 3-5 weeks. There’s a place for everyone. “Some aren’t happy doing customer-facing jobs, so they can work in the kitchen,” says Moen. After persistent customer requests for smoothies and



A few members of The Nest Team (with founder Jane Moen, center back) on just another day of creating community caring!



At The Nest in Deep River, Katie sets out some of the shop's homemade pup cones.

shakes, they fundraised to buy a quiet commercial blender – noise being a trigger of stress and anxiety.

Region 4 School District Special Education Director Sarah Smalley has steered almost 20 students to The Nest. “Oh my gosh! It’s opened up a world of possibilities. We’ve had students who’ve come here who have moved and found jobs on their own. This place builds competence, confidence, and trust in themselves. It opens the world.”

Sam (The Nest prefers to keep employees’ surnames private) is busy wiping tables with sanitizer that he mixes himself, sweeping, and watering plants. He points to big pots outside the front door: “You have to water the heck out of these trees.”

Former employee Tim of Deep River arrives for a visit and a drink. He works for a pet groomer now and loves it. When at The Nest, he says, “I was 100 percent happy.”

Employee Marina Capezzone, 25, doesn’t have a disability, but her brother does. “I have enough horror stories to fill a novel because of people being

so intolerant.” She says it’s a pleasure watching employees grow and leave for new jobs. One, in particular, makes her smile when he comes to visit. “He comes in here with some swagger, which he did not have to begin with.”

A DIVERSE WORKPLACE INSPIRES CUSTOMER LOYALTY

The big picture: that’s what organizers of Coffee for Good in Greenwich have in mind. They are visiting local businesses to talk to them about hiring their trainees.

“We’re really passionate about our work force,” says Executive Director Deb Rogan. Trainees (24 of them, at the time we spoke) work four three-hour shifts a week for 6-12 months, depending on the individual.

Rogan believes that Coffee for Good provides an especially convincing hiring argument: “This is really one of the first full-scale training programs [in the country] that operates as a business.”

The shop opened this June in the lovely 1858 Italianate stone building next to the Second Congregational Church. Rogan attends the church, which owns the building and enthusiastically backed her idea to launch this program.

Only one month after opening, Rogan says in July, “We’re starting to see regulars.”

In walked John Stratton to get his already “usual”: hot chocolate with homemade whipped cream. “I like that they’re helping the kids from Abilis,” he says. Abilis is the local non-profit that partners with Coffee for Good, providing rides and job coaches.

Trainee Ali Glance, 23, says she especially likes making espressos and adds, “I’m getting good at lattes.” Her shift goes by quickly, she says, in part thanks to shift leader David Thompson. “I think he’s very funny.”

Alex Baumann, 25, is a manager. “It’s fun,” he says. “At first, I asked for help. I’m learning I can do it.” His serious expression morphs into a big smile when he adds, “I like making money!”

Helen Lobrana of Old Greenwich is on the team reaching out to local businesses. “We’re inviting them in for a coffee and to see our people in action. People aren’t used to seeing people with disabilities working, frankly. We stress it makes for a diverse workplace. Customers like it. It creates customer loyalty.

“They’re very capable,” Lobrana says. A Norwich business owner told her, “If I could have more employees like that, I’d take 10 of them.”

The skills learned at Coffee for Good are “easy to transition to retail, florists, cafes, restaurants, community institutions, hotels, and big retail chains like Home Depot. Our aim is to move into the big local corporations,” she says. “There’s a shift happening. Businesses thought they couldn’t keep up. I’d say, your competitors are finding out they can.”

A JUDGMENT-FREE ZONE

Julie’s Cup of Joe in Westbrook in the past hired employees with disabilities but found its niche in the work-study program it created for local high school students.

Once a week, students and their job coaches come from Westbrook, Old Saybrook, and Clinton to work in the for-profit shop that Julie and Joe Campbell opened in 2018. “We originally wanted to work with people with disabilities because they get a raw deal everywhere else,” says Julie. “We also have a large population of Westbrook residents [with disabilities] who are our customers. They take a long time to order and don’t know what they want, or they don’t have enough money.”

The staff wears shirts with a Mother Theresa quote: “If you judge people, you have no time to love them.”

“We’re teaching our customers, too,” says Julie. “So, if you’re tapping your foot because someone’s taking too long, hopefully you’ll see the back of our shirt.”

She concludes, “It’s so much more than selling coffee.” ☒



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