

Posted on Fri, May. 18, 2007

MIAMI

Miami cafe serves up hope

A LITTLE HAITI CAFE PROVIDES SANDWICHES, COFFEE -- AND THE SKILLS THAT ITS COOKS AND SERVERS NEED FOR AN INDEPENDENT LIFE

BY CAROL MARBIN MILLER

cmarbin@MiamiHerald.com

Alfred Lee flashes a toothy smile as bright as a sunrise. He is hoisting a tray with about 20 tuna and pimento hoagies.

"Would you like to try some tuna?" he asks a guest of Cafe MAC, the Little Haiti sandwich shop that employs him. "I hope you like our restaurant."

Just five years ago, Lee, 26, was living in an institution for people with developmental disabilities. He needed help just to complete the tasks of daily living, such as showering. He has never before held a real job. Now, however, he is the unfailingly polite face of a money-making enterprise.

Sort of.

Cafe MAC, open from 7 a.m. through 3 p.m., is not just any restaurant. Several of its employees can speak only in one-word or two-word sentences. Many have spent most of their lives in either group homes or institutions. A couple have had trouble feeding themselves, let alone serving others.

All of the cafe's staff of 12 cooks and servers have mental retardation or another developmental disability. They prepare sandwiches and salads, take orders, keep inventory and handle money with the help of specially trained "coaches."

"They do everything but arrange the delivery of the food," said MACtown chief Clint Bower. That's done by the cafe's manager, who also keeps the books.

FESTIVE OPENING

Festooned with red, white and blue balloons, and hosting a coterie of dignitaries, Cafe MAC celebrated its grand opening Thursday with croquetas, sub sandwiches, *pastelitos* and strawberry smoothies. There were some glitches: a poster board sign nearly blew away, and a group of homeless men crashed the party in search of free food.

The brainchild of MACtown, a nonprofit agency that provides residential and therapeutic services for disabled people, the cafe offers breakfast and lunch at reasonable prices: \$2.50 for a breakfast sandwich; \$4 for a Cuban or turkey and Swiss cheese sandwich; \$2.50 for a small Caesar salad; \$1.25 for a *cortadito*.

The cafe will cater your next party, with a minimum of one week's notice. There's a Dog House for wiener lovers, including chili dogs and bacon and cheese dogs, or the Dog with Works, the priciest frankfurter, at \$3.25.

The most expensive items on the menu: a Chicken Fiesta sandwich with provolone, roasted peppers and honey mustard, the Italian sub and the roast beef and cheddar sandwich, all at \$5.

"A bargain," boasts the cafe's promotional material.

MACtown staffers don't expect to post much of a profit, or any at all. It's not about the money, said Bower, the MACtown leader.

"This is just a stepping-stone," he said. "We didn't open the cafe to make money. Our residents will stay here for 90 days or six months and hopefully get jobs at restaurants or hotels. Then we will move new people into their jobs."

Terrence Wilson, 44, lived with an aunt in Hialeah until she suggested it was time for him to make his own way. He ended up at MACtown, and now he makes sandwiches at the cafe. He hopes to earn enough money someday to buy more clothes, shoes and bathroom stuff. "I'm a grown man," he said. "It's time for me to get my own place."

The restaurant job, he said, is fine, though the kitchen isn't particularly comfortable. "It's too hot," said Wilson.

For Lee, his job as a waiter offers him the promise of someday getting a job as a stocker or bagger at Publix or another supermarket, moving into his own apartment and learning to pay his rent, utilities and grocery bills within a budget.

"I have to work smart in order to get the job done," Lee said during a break from his serving responsibilities Thursday. "You have to do what your boss says, no question about it. That's how the world is."

"I am trying to be independent, be on my own," Lee said. "Very, very soon, I will find an outside job, then live on my own."

NOTHING LIKE IT

Helene Good, president of CCDH, formerly the Community Committee for Developmental Handicaps, can't think of another business anywhere that looks quite like Cafe MAC.

"What makes this so special, such a neat thing, is that it is good for the individuals and also good for the neighborhood. The neighborhood needs it.

"It's original."