

Community Cafe is coffee with social purpose



By Brock Weir

Coffee has brought people together for millennia, whether it is that first cup in the morning around the breakfast table or the beverage of choice on a quick first date.

This fall, it will continue to bring people together ? but the Aurora Community Café is doing something a bit different: it is percolating with a social purpose.

The Aurora Community Café is a new experimental pilot project spearheaded by several community non-profit agencies and local churches to provide employment opportunities to adults with intellectual disabilities while offering a space for people in Aurora and Newmarket to connect.

It is a brainchild with several parents, including Community Living Aurora-Newmarket, St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church, as well as Commons Coffee, the mainstay of the Newmarket Farmers' Market which provides employment and teaching opportunities to adults living with intellectual challenges through hands-on work as baristas.

Beginning November 8, this success will begin brewing at St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church at Mosley and Victoria Streets and continuing each Wednesday from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m.

Its purpose is to serve fair trade coffee, tea and fresh baked goods to those in the community, offer work experience to these adults in a supportive environment, and create a space for the community to come together.

The idea for a café such as this first came from support staff at Community Living, whose clients regularly volunteer at Martha's Table, the affordable community lunch held weekly at St. Andrew's under the auspices of Welcome Table.

This, however, provided these adults with a volunteer opportunity just once a week and that simply was not enough.

?They were looking for other places,? says St. Andrew's Rev. Paul Kang. ?The idea of creating something else on another day started, and it was also in conjunction with people we meet in the community where there is a lot of loneliness and isolation. There weren't a lot of opportunities for people to come together, and the genesis of this was the need for employment opportunities for people with disabilities and also a space where the community can connect and interact with one another.?

The next step was to reach out to Commons Coffee, which has been providing just such opportunities for dozens of York Region adults for over five years.

Commons Coffee was founded by Susan Popper and her daughter, who lives with autism.

When her daughter graduated from high school they found a shortage of volunteer opportunities within the community so set out to change the status quo.

Eventually they found their niche at the Newmarket Farmers' Market, growing each year, and now providing between 13 and 15 adults under their umbrella who do three or four hour shifts at a time, expanding their business to catering at myriad local events including the recent Harvest Festival hosted at Shepherd's Bush by Windfall Ecology Centre.

?We like the idea of being out in the community and making connections,? says Ms. Popper. ?There are a lot of the same issues: loneliness and isolation, living at home after graduation doing nothing and watching TV. Parents have to quit their jobs so they can look after them and a lot of them don't know what to do. At Commons Coffee, we provide training opportunities and they are also

our partners in business and get paid.?

While expertise of the adults working with Commons Coffee has been a winning recipe, your help is needed to help complete the Aurora Community Café's recipe for success.

The adults bring with them all that is needed to give Starbuck's a run for its money, but bakers are needed to help complete the picture and impart the skills to help them bake that perfect cookie or muffin. Whether you are a professional baker with a few hours to spare each week, or a home baker keen to share your love of baking with others, the Aurora Community Café would love to hear from you.

They would also love to see your support next Sunday, October 15, at 2 p.m. when St. Andrew's Presbyterian hosts the York Region Community Choir in concert.

Single tickets for the concert are on sale now at \$25 (\$30 at the door, seniors and students \$20) by calling 905-727-6567 and all proceeds will go towards supporting the Aurora Community Café.

?It really boils down to this: when we go to Tim Hortons, they are really busy, but we think there are also people out there in the community who want to enjoy their coffee but also support a not-for-profit business that has a larger purpose ? and that is to bring people together from different backgrounds and different abilities,? says Rev. Kang. ?It's about how we are all a community together.?