Compassion Cafe Fills Need In Job Market, Fills Bellies With Breakfast, Fills Hearts With Hope

By: Victoria Ford

A new jewel has been added to the crown of the so-called Queen City.



Sharing a Moment at Compassion Cafe.
Photo Credit: Victoria Ford

Compassion Café is a registered 501(c)3 nonprofit founded by Sue Sharkey and Erin Sharkey that employs adolescents and adults with disabilities, thus providing them with meaningful, real-world work experience and the reward of earning a paycheck. The café officially opened May 10 and operates out of Barry's Do Me a Flavor in Beach Haven, Monday through Thursday mornings, 7 to 11 a.m. Barry and Nicole Baxter, close friends of the Sharkeys', were onboard right away.

"When Sue Sharkey first mentioned the idea, Nicole and I were immediately in – more for who it was, than what it was," Barry Baxter explained. "The Sharkeys are like family to us, since their oldest daughter Pam started working here at age 14. We have since had Paul and Sue's other kids, Eric and Megan, along with several nieces, including Erin, and in fact still employ Anna and Kaitlyn whenever they can break away from their 'real jobs.'"

During the pandemic, Erin Sharkey of Manahawkin and her aunt Sue Sharkey, were brainstorming ways to "change the world."

In addition to their *joie de vivre* and love of country, the two women share in common their frustration with the lack of job/vocation opportunities for people with special needs who have aged out of school-based or other programs.

As a behavioral analyst, Erin works with children with autism and behavioral issues, often in Ocean County schools, and has observed their struggle to find gainful employment after high school. Sue is a retired high school gym teacher; her husband is retired Ship Bottom Police Chief Paul Sharkey. So between them, they had the educational and public service background covered. Erin, having worked in restaurants and learned how to deal with all different kinds of people as well as money and time management skills, wanted to do something in foodservice.

Thus, Compassion Café was born.

Everyone warned them it would be difficult.

"We needed to think outside the box and envision the perfect situation, the best experience for our prospective employees for years to come," they said.

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Staff Outside Cafe.
Photo credit: Victoria Ford

They compiled a "what if" list: What if others shared their vision and were willing to donate? What if they could borrow space inside an existing restaurant to use during off-hours? (They call this their "pop-up" plan, targeting a different location each summer.) What if they had access to a commercial kitchen and workspace for training, skill work and socialization? What if they gave a job to every single person who wanted one? What if they gained the support of a dedicated volunteers and gracious customers? These were long-shot dreams. But every single one has come true.

The staff sells coffee, bagels, quiche, fruit, yogurt, muffins and cake. They also make and sell dog treats. Café apparel is also popular.

But the customers are in it for more than the delicious breakfast products, Sue Sharkey said; they're looking to get a little joy and compassion with their crumb cake.

"They are coming for the service – and the service is extraordinary."

Meanwhile, the staff feels fulfilled by having a purpose and legitimized by getting paid, which they understand to be a normal part of life for their parents, siblings, and friends. Whether they know the difference in price between a cupcake and a car is beside the point, Sue said. For some of them, working at the café is the first time they have felt truly valued for their work.

Furthermore, their interactions with the public foster tolerance and acceptance. And that learning experience, Sue said, is worth more than words can say. "There's no lesson plan for that," she said, emotion welling up.

After MSNBC anchor Stephanie Ruhl's story on Beach Haven's Compassion Café reached TV and online audiences July 2, an anonymous viewer donated $10,000 to the project. Then Bloomberg Philanthropies donated $25,000.

After delivering the money to the café, Ruhle said her heart was ready to burst. "I've had the opportunity to cover a lot of significant events, interview influential people, and tell amazing stories," she said, "but Compassion Café is by far the most special."

The café's mission isn't simply to help those who have limited job opportunities, Ruhle explained. "It is an opportunity for us (as consumers) to examine who and what we value, and for employers to re-imagine our workforce."

Erin Sharkey said she is "totally humbled and honored" by the generosity of the donors and supporters. Seeing that "people believe in what we have dreamt up" is both heartwarming and affirming. Of course, the Sharkeys owe a debt of gratitude to the Baxters for opening their doors to the project. "They are the most phenomenal people," Erin said.

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"The joy Nicole and I get from watching what the girls have created with Compassion Cafe goes far beyond anything any of us had ever imagined," Barry Baxter said.

Erin is also energized by the success and positive exposure the café has had in such a short time. "This is just the beginning," she said. Eventually she would like to see locations on the Island's north end and in Manahawkin.

The Sharkeys are committed to offering employment to all qualified job seekers. "Projections expect that to mean 50 to 60 people, filling approximately two shifts per week," they explained. "Can the sale of coffee and bagels cover the wages of eight or more employees per hour? No. We'd need donations to supplement our wages. Donations began to flow – big and small, with messages affirming that (the community's) hearts are alive for the mission of Compassion Cafe."

They have devised a sponsorship program with different levels of giving – Sea Glass, Sand Dollar and Starfish. Small, localized fundraisers in the form of garden parties are also in the works. "We are appreciative and honored to be trusted with smallest to largest donations," Sue Sharkey said, adding gifts from $5 to $100 have been the foundation on which they have built their success.

As Sue outlined, the scope of the operation is far greater than simply selling coffee, baked goods and dog treats. Compassion Café has a 61-person core of volunteers; 44 staff members; and a managerial team of six. In four hours' time the café might employ 23 staffers, she said.

The volunteers started helping with in-person trainings in April. The United Methodist Church in Beach Haven Terrace has been "invaluable to us," she said, as a meeting place, training ground and storage/baking facility where the staff makes the dog treats (peanut butter Wheat Thins and icing-dipped Milkbones). The church is where a lot of the real skill-building happens, in terms of prep and side work before they go to Barry's. Staff members are given a schedule; they clock their time setting up, selling their goods and interacting with customers, accounting for the money and cleaning up.

Many more volunteers provide the "unnoticed supervision" during hours of operation – keeping an eye on people and things outside and monitoring the "time clock." Those volunteers' biggest contribution is peace of mind, Sue said.

April brought a surprise in the form of a generous grant from the Virginia B. Toulmin Foundation, which is based in New York City but has trustees with connections to Long Beach Island. Since then, reports of the good work being done at Compassion Café have continued to spread through positive press and word of mouth.

"We took a risk to start this," Sue said. But as the influx of contributions and volunteer commitments quickly made apparent, "the community is so ready for it." With the Baxters' blessing, the café will continue to run through Sept. 16.

"To see these kids in action and so happy, so early in the morning, is not something you can buy," Barry Baxter said. "It's priceless."

Ruhle sees the Compassion Café story as a beacon of hope for the economy. "Every day we hear about a labor shortage in America – scores of low-wage/low-skill jobs with no one to fill them. If we reconsider who can fill those jobs, we might not have such a big shortage," she said. What's more, according to Ruhle, over 80% of disabled Americans are not working, and many would like to be.

"If we, as consumers and employers, could inject a bit more grace and patience in our daily lives, the amazing team at Compassion Café proves the American Dream is alive and love wins."