

At Bakery, a Sweeter Life for Disabled

By Annie Gowen
Washington Post Staff Writer
Thursday, August 26, 2004; Page PW03

The green bowls on the counter at Arlington's Wildflour Bakery and Cafe are piled high with crisp cookies and plump muffins -- oatmeal raisin, chocolate chip, blueberry and lemon poppy seed.

But the bakery, which opened in February, is heralded for more than its sweet treats. It is also a unique small retail business for the county: a nonprofit operation that provides jobs to county residents with developmental disabilities. There are 12 nonprofits that work with the county to employ people with disabilities, but nearly all are "center-based" programs in which workers do jobs such as sort mail or make small electronic parts.

"The new thing about Wildflour is that it integrates a small business with a nonprofit that can provide job opportunities for those with developmental disabilities," said Joanna Wise Barnes, a coordinator in the county's mental retardation-developmental disabilities unit.

Employment opportunities for the 240 disabled adults who receive benefits from the county once were limited to janitorial service and other laborer jobs.

"We have had very few retail opportunities for them previously," Barnes said.

One of the workers partly responsible for the mounds of delectable treats is Cheryl Elem, a disabled Arlington resident who says she relishes her new job at the bakery and catering shop in the Williamsburg Shopping Center in North Arlington. Elem, 42, used to work picking up trash in the parking lots of local convenience stores. She considers her new job a big improvement. On any given day, she will help scoop cookies, pour bread into molds, assemble sandwiches and wash dishes.

"I like working here much better," Elem said. "It was too cold for me outside. I wanted to be inside. It's easier and a lot more fun. I like talking to people when they come in."

On a recent day at the bakery on North Sycamore Street -- cheerfully decorated with a Mediterranean feel, with cafe tables and oil paintings on the wall -- a steady stream of regulars stopped in for coffee, pies, pastries, pizza and quick chats.

"They are so friendly here," proclaimed hairdresser Amina Elhouti, 33, who works nearby and stops in each morning for coffee. She was eating a white-and-chocolate-swirled "yin and yang" cookie, a new treat dreamed up by General Manager Alberto Sangiorgio, 52, a European-trained chef who oversees the restaurant's menu and catering operation.

A long wooden table held loaves of freshly baked pumpernickel, sun-dried tomato and wheat bread. One display case was filled with tiny pastries -- miniature strawberry tarts, chocolate cups filled with chocolate mousse -- that would be gone within the day, Sangiorgio said. Another had panini, meatballs, grilled vegetables and pasta for sale by the pound, including Sangiorgio's "tortellini Caruso" with a sauce from a secret family recipe.

The bakery was started by Jim Rogan, who founded a company called E-Tron Services Inc. in 1986 to contract with Fairfax County and employ disabled workers to make electronic parts in a Lorton office park.

He based the company on a model developed by a professor at the University of Oregon, which advocates taking developmentally disabled adults out of care centers and integrating them into the job market if possible.

"For companies, it's a huge benefit because they are so consistent in their work," Rogan said. "There is so much turnover in the service industry, it's often hard to find long-term help."

Rogan started the Wildflour Bread Mill in Fairfax City in 1994 with help from the county's Community Services Board. He was inspired by Fairfax County special education teacher and co-founder Jean Wood, who was worried about the future of several autistic students in her class at Fairfax High School and contacted him. Three of her students later went on to work at the bakery.

It has not always been easy. The main bakery, which is subsidized by county and federal grants, was threatened by budget cuts and lost its lease last year.

But "every single day is rewarding," said Sangiorgio, who is general manager of the bakery's food operation, in addition to his full-time job for Giant Foods. "In Fairfax, we had a guy who is autistic and never said anything . . . for years. Now he's coming out of his shell. I think it's in part to do with the fact we work together as a family."

After losing the Fairfax City lease, Rogan moved the baking and catering operation to Chantilly, where it employs 10 disabled workers as



Cisco
Collaboration
Technology

Discover new ways

[Learn how](#)



welc
the h

bakers and deli assistants. This is also where many of the operation's elaborate pastries and special-occasion cakes are made. The bakery in Arlington employs two workers with disabilities, with slots for two more.

Arlington County provided \$30,000 in start-up costs and subsidizes the training of disabled staff members, about \$15,000 to \$20,000 per employee each year. That money in part funds the salaries of part-time fellow employees, many of whom have special education training and help the workers learn their new skills.

Ellen Berty, 56, a retired special education teacher who works part time at the bakery, said she sits with the employees during downtime and goes over the newspaper with them, so they can better understand current events and talk to customers.

Hilary Koon, a counselor who works in Elem's Arlington group home, said she has noticed a marked change in Elem since she was hired by the bakery in February.

"She's excited. She talks about it all the time," Koon said. "When she gets home, she tells me all about what she did -- cutting vegetables, doing dishes. She's looking forward to another day's work."

Workers are paid, which contributes to their independence and sense of self-esteem, employees said.

"Our goal is to have each individual participate in daily life in Arlington in as normal a way as possible," Barnes said. "To the extent they can be integrated into the community, it works great for them and meets our goals."

Many of Wildflour's regular customers are unaware of the bakery and cafe's mission.

Keith Collins, 49, an exterminator from Dale City, stopped in to order one of the bakery's special pies recently. He knows the bakeries in Northern Virginia well and said he likes the pecan pie at Wildflour the best.

"I'm crazy about pecan pie. . . . Here, it's the filling that makes it good," Collins said. "It's not too sweet and not too gooey. That's why I'm back."

Other customers come to the shop because they admire its mission.

Falls Church residents Joe and Tina Erman visit Wildflour for after-dinner coffee and dessert two or three times a week.

"That's one of the reasons we patronize the store," Tina Erman said.

"It's more than a place to buy baked goods. It's a place where people with disabilities can work in a structured environment and find jobs that are rewarding and fulfilling. That's part of what the bakery is about."