



Coffee, Community, and Celebrating Every Life

By AnnaScott Cross

At any given point before 3 p.m. each day, I probably have a cup of coffee on hand. Hot, cold, fancy, or simple, I am a coffee person. In addition to my passion for coffee, I also have a passion for public health, entrepreneurship, and creative problem solving. Imagine my delight when I heard that there are coffee shops that intentionally employ people with a disability. I recently got the chance to visit several of them and learn more about how they work. Please join me on what I have fondly dubbed my Coffee Tour.

Challenges Faced by the IDD Community

Before we launch into these unique coffee shops, let's talk about why they matter. There are approximately 6.5 million people with an intellectual disability in the United States, and the resources available to them are greatly reduced after they finish high school.¹ The intellectual and developmental disability (IDD) community

includes a wide range of abilities and challenges, such as communication, interpersonal skills, and occupational skills, which can limit their ability to participate in everyday activities, including employment. One study found that the unemployment rate for adults with an IDD was more than twice as high as the rate for those without a disability.²

For the average adult, a large portion of their sense of purpose and social interactions stems from their job. Combining the high unemployment rate for adults with an IDD with the fact that there aren't many programs designed to accommodate them, it can be a challenge for them to participate with and engage in society.

Individuals with an IDD are human beings and, like all human beings, they need meaningful social interaction. So, what's available for them once they finish high school?

¹ <https://www.specialolympics.org/about/intellectual-disabilities/what-is-intellectual-disability>

² <https://www.specialolympics.org/our-work/research/national-snapshot-of-adults-with-intellectual-disabilities-in-the-labor-force>



Employment for the IDD Community

While there are some challenges that a person with an IDD may face in the work environment, the saddest part about this situation is that some of their biggest barriers to employment are other people's perceptions of their abilities, not their actual abilities. This includes discrimination, stigma, employers' and employees' attitudes, management style, and working environment.¹ The IDD community is made up of some of the most wonderful people I've ever met, each of whom can make an excellent addition to almost any company.

¹ <https://europepmc.org/article/med/36214017>

² <https://www.bittyandbeauscoffee.com/about/our-story/>

Over the last decade, people have started to realize this and intentionally found solutions. In 2016, Amy and Ben Wright opened Bitty & Beau's Coffee in Wilmington, North Carolina. They designed their business model to employ people with IDs after two of their children were born with Down syndrome. The coffee shop quickly received national attention, and has now grown to include 25 shops across 11 states with over 400 employees.² This idea quickly caught on, inspiring many others to start similar businesses. On my Coffee Tour, I had the privilege of visiting four coffee shops right here in North Carolina inspired by the desire to lower the unemployment rate for the IDD community.

Miller's Brew Coffee Shop

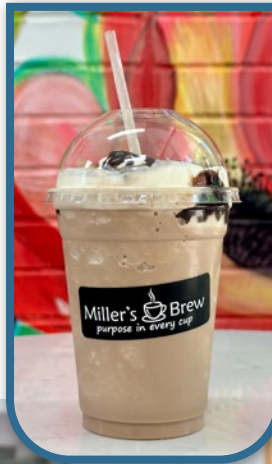
LOCATION: Fayetteville, NC

OPENED: 2023

CO-FOUNDER/EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR: Kim Molnar

DRINK RECOMMENDATION: Espresso Milkshake

Miller's Brew Coffee Shop is a part of a larger organization known as Miller's Crew. Kim and Karl Molnar started this organization in 2016 after realizing just how few career opportunities there were for adults with an IDD. Kim is a speech therapist, and their son, Miller, has autism, so they have seen up close the barriers facing the IDD community. Miller's Crew has now grown to offer vocational training labs for adolescents, a food truck (which serves as a mobile training lab), and most recently, a coffee shop. In addition to employment opportunities, they also offer bimonthly parent support nights, and are working to build partnerships with other businesses in their area so that their employees have places they can work once they've finished the job training program through Miller's Crew.



Moji Coffee

LOCATION: Winston-Salem, NC

OPENED: 2019

PROGRAM DIRECTOR: Dan Wellman

DRINK RECOMMENDATION: Iced Chai Latte

This coffee shop was started in 2017 when a group of parents of children with an IDD were concerned about the lack of opportunities available to their children after they finished high school. They formed a coalition along with Tim Flavin, a community advocate and Special Olympics coach, and Natalie Hughes, a community advocate from the restaurant industry. They opened their doors in 2019, and now they have a five-component training program focusing on life skills, technological skills, communication, comprehension, and integration/adaptability. They also work one-on-one with employees to meet them where they are and help them become the best they can be. Now some of their original Mojistas (what they call their baristas) have been promoted to be job coaches or have gone on to pursue further career opportunities. In addition to delicious coffee, their dog-friendly location in downtown Winston-Salem also sells art and jewelry made by individuals with an IDD.

Awaken Coffee

LOCATION: Greenville, NC

OPENED: 2023

PRESIDENT/CO-FOUNDER: Carol Preston

VICE PRESIDENT/CO-FOUNDER: Jennifer Dyson

DRINK RECOMMENDATION: Iced Mocha

Carol and Jennifer started their vision for this organization in 2018 after Carol had visited Bitty & Beau's coffee shop in Wilmington. Carol has a nephew who has Down syndrome, and Jennifer has a son with autism, so both were familiar with the challenge of finding employment opportunities for the IDD community. They have worked tirelessly since then to make this vision a reality. Even in the short amount of time Awaken Coffee has been open, they have found their employees are making better eye contact, communicating more effectively, smiling more, and taking more initiative, even at home. The Greenville community has embraced them, and they are already thinking about how they can continue to grow and expand in the future.



A Special Blend

LOCATION: Greensboro, NC

OPENED: 2018

BOARD PRESIDENT: Deedee Ungetheim

DRINK RECOMMENDATION: Mango Smoothie

A Special Blend began in 2016, when Deedee had the opportunity to visit Bitty & Beau's in Wilmington. She was stunned by their work, especially as the parent of a child with a rare syndrome and her experience working with a Christian organization for high school kids with disabilities. On the drive home, she realized she needed to start something similar in Greensboro, and thus A Special Blend was formed, creating 'a special blend' of people with all types of abilities and disabilities. Their structure includes monthly goal setting, equipping employees with life skills and career skills, and strategically adjusting to create a work environment that accommodates different needs. Now they have dreams of expanding, potentially including a second location or kiosk locations, catering coffee at events, and starting a food truck.



Why This Model Works

It's true that there can be some job skills that some individuals with an IDD do not have, but there are many things they can do if we are willing to meet them where they are. In many ways they are far more gifted in what is truly important. They are some of the friendliest, kindest, and most loving people I have ever met. Working at a coffee shop gives them the opportunity to do what they're already good at while learning new skills.

Clearly, this model is effective. There are coffee shops like the ones mentioned above across the country. Bitty & Beau's now has 25 locations nationwide, and North Carolina has at least 11 coffee shops that share in this vision. Much of this movement can be traced back to Bitty & Beau's when they opened their first location in Wilmington.

Building Career and Life Skills

All of these coffee shops include training programs for their employees that are intentionally designed to meet them where they are and help them grow at their own pace. They offer a safe and encouraging environment that allows individuals with an IDD to learn new things. As we all know, getting a new job is often largely based on past work experience, and these programs enable these

individuals to get that initial experience so they can go on to pursue new opportunities in the future.

Bigger than this, though, is the opportunity it provides for individuals with an IDD to experience another part of life. They have the chance to work hard and earn an income, and it gives them something to talk about when people ask how their day went. There are so many things that these beautiful people are capable of doing, and coffee shops like these celebrate abilities rather than fixating on disabilities. This community has been told what they can't do, and it's time to start focusing on what they can do.

The Opportunity to be Social

As mentioned above, after high school, there are few opportunities for individuals with an IDD to engage with their community, especially if they are unemployed. The social skills they learn and practice every day at these coffee shops translate to the rest of their lives, with parents commenting that their children are making better eye contact, smiling more, taking more initiative, and communicating better. In addition to social skills, every person I interviewed mentioned the beautiful relationships that have formed between staff members, volunteers, and customers. They have truly created some of the most welcoming environments I have been in.

Coffee Shops Across North Carolina



Creating a Special Blend of People

One of the most amazing components of these businesses is that they bring people with and without an IDD together to build a community. Deedee shared the story of one of the employees at A Special Blend who had been kept behind closed doors at a previous job. In situations like these, as Deedee explained, "Everybody misses out." She added that creating an environment where people with and without an IDD work together gives the community "a wonderful opportunity to interact with a segment of the population they often just don't."

Oftentimes, people without a disability can feel uncomfortable interacting with someone who has a disability, but this is largely due to the fact that the average person doesn't have the opportunity to interact with a person with a disability on a regular basis. Facilitating these interactions helps both parties be more comfortable and confident talking to all kinds of people.

These coffee shops have given their employees the opportunity to shine, all while creating a safe and welcoming environment for everyone who walks through their doors. Parents made multiple comments about how comforting it was to be able to drop their child off at work and know that they would be safe and taken care of while still living a rich life.

Worth the Work

While these coffee shops are incredible, there are still many challenges that the leaders and staff members must overcome. For example, many of these employees struggle with transportation. If they aren't able to drive or don't have someone to take them, they might have to navigate public transportation or get an Uber, which can be expensive and tricky with schedules. From a leadership position, these coffee shops have to be run a bit differently than the average coffee shop. Managers must be more hands-on, and they generally need more employees than usual for each shift. In addition to this, there are the different accommodations that they make to enable their employees to have as much independence as possible. Despite the extra work, these organizations have created a beautiful culture, and it is clearly making an impact.

What People are Saying



GOOGLE REVIEW: Awaken Coffee

"We were greeted by some amazingly friendly people and showered with smiles and brightness from behind the counter. The coffee was hot and delicious but the best part was the community vibe I experienced. I walked out of there with a smile on my face and in my heart ❤️."

— Kelly B.

GOOGLE REVIEW: A Special Blend

"I absolutely love this place and everything that it stands for! The people are amazing and the coffee is as well ❤️."

— Tiffani B.

GOOGLE REVIEW: Moji Coffee

"This place is awesome!! The shop is so lovely and bright, it was so cool to look at all the art up on the walls. The coffee was absolutely delicious, strong and not overly sweet. Our pup loves their treats and their pup of joy. We will absolutely come back for more!"

— Susan B.

GOOGLE REVIEW: Miller's Brew

"Amazing coffee and an even better staff! Everyone is so friendly and so patient! I couldn't immediately decide what I wanted and was met with nothing but kindness and a smile."

— Keira B.

Coffee With a Purpose

These coffee shops are doing amazing work, and are changing lives one cup of coffee at a time. If you are interested in learning more, check out the coffee shop closest to you! Whether you donate financially, volunteer, or even just drop in to get a cup of coffee, you can play a part in celebrating the value of every individual and be a part of their welcoming community.

In the words of Deedee, "Everyone deserves a place to belong." 🏡



Anna Scott Cross is the Communications Director for the North Carolina Family Policy Council and is Editor of Family North Carolina.