



Food for Thought!

Dr Faizal Bin Yahya
IPS Research Fellow

On 4th August 2010, my IPS colleagues and I had lunch at Professor Brawn Café. A social enterprise, the café is managed and based on the values of quality, dignity and inclusiveness. I was intrigued by the word inclusiveness and wanted to know more about the café from its pleasant manager and owner Mr Roland Tay and his wife, Member of Parliament Denise Phua.

Prior to managing Professor Brawn café, Roland was a senior vice-president at ST Telemedia. In 2008, he decided to leave the corporate world to follow the “stirring in his heart” and ventured into the social enterprise arena. What motivated him to make the switch? It was Denise, her passion to help their autistic son, Jun-Yi, and the meaning she gained in doing so. His wife’s role in founding Pathlight (an autism-focused school) and the implementation of other initiatives to help those with special needs encouraged the setting up of the café, which aims to make a difference in the special needs community. In turn, the inspiration behind the café’s concept is Jun-Yi’s self drawn superhero character, Professor Brawn. Jun-Yi’s Professor Brawn is strong, smart and kind, values the social enterprise echoes in its business strategies.

Is the business economically viable? You bet. Having sunk in \$ 200 000 of their own money in the initial outlay, Roland and Denise have recouped that initial investment and now, the daily takings sustain the café’s daily operations. The café’s staff strength is 15, of which five are autistic. However, the owners are clear in stating that the café is not a charitable operation and hard work is duly recognised. Staff are paid market rates, roughly the equivalent of what they would earn at Starbucks, said Roland. He believes that ideally, special needs employees should make up 30 percent of the total staff.

Did work processes have to be reconfigured? In short, yes. This is because the work load had to be compartmentalised into manageable steps for the café's special needs employees, and also as the employees might have to deal with intolerant customers. Denise also emphasised that the business model was developed in such a way that it could be replicated. The café also retails goods such as T-shirts and note books produced by other special needs children.

How do the special needs employees cope on the job? We met and talked to Amos, one of the café's autistic employees. After his initial reservation, Amos proved quite chatty and was very sociable. It then struck me that I had met Amos years back when I was helping out at Margaret Drive Special School, and when visiting Chao Yang Special School, where my Downs Syndrome daughter Nina had attended. I believe in what Denise and Roland are advocating in that people with special needs could lead meaningful and productive lives. Denise and Roland have put their money on the line and have proven that a business venture employing special needs employees is workable.

Last but not least, the food is awesome and affordable. As we finished our delicious and memorable lunch, I had renewed hope that for Jun-Yi, Amos, Nina, and others with special needs, we as a community, could indeed make a difference in their lives. Why don't you, the reader, learn more about this meaningful business venture and have your lunch or dinner at Professor Brawn Café? You too can make a difference!

Professor Brawn Café is located at # 02-78/79 Novena Square, 238 Thomson Road, S 307683.



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