

FAMILY: Great vibes for menu and mission

BILL LOHMANN
POINT OF VIEW

Jan 25, 2005



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The lights were dim and the music low as I settled into a corner booth and ordered a beer and a plate of jambalaya.

The beer was cold, the jamba laya hot and the atmosphere inviting. What's not to like? I give it four stars.

This is why I'm not a restaurant critic.

My tastes are, shall we say, uncomplicated.

I am, however, picky about the stories I write. This, I think, is a tasty one.

My dinner the other night was at the Positive Vibe Cafe, a new restaurant off Forest Hill Avenue that has not only a wide-ranging menu but a very specific mission. Its aim is to help people with disabilities help themselves and serve good food in the process.

I wrote last spring about Garth Larcen ("Good Vibes: Restaurant Will Serve Up Training for Those With Special Need, No Job," April 27), the force behind the Positive Vibe. At the time, the restaurant existed only on blueprints and in Larcen's dreams. Its future home was a gutted storefront undergoing a major facelift in the Stratford Hills Shopping Center. Where I saw exposed pipes and wires, Larcen saw a sleek dining room and a well-equipped kitchen.

The process has been long and frustrating, and there have been times during the planning and hoping that Larcen wondered if this place would ever open.

But here it is, with frosty beer and steaming jambalaya and real, live customers.

Sometimes dreams come true.

Now, Larcen just has to make it work.

"We need people to come and support us," said Larcen, "and we need to make sure we can deliver good food and do the training at the same time."

Larcen, an insurance consultant who was in the restaurant business years ago, came up with the idea for Positive Vibe after his son, Max, who has muscular dystrophy, had difficulty finding a job. Lack of experience was often cited by employers as a reason, so Larcen launched an effort to help Max and others with physical and mental disadvantages find careers in the food-service industry.

He established the Get Lost MD (Muscular Dystrophy) Foundation and started devising a restaurant that would also serve as a training school where basic kitchen and restaurant skills would be taught, free of charge, to people with special needs.

POSITIVE VIBE CAFE

OPEN for lunch and dinner six days a week (closed Mondays) in Stratford Hills Shopping Center on Forest Hill Avenue.

HOURS: Tuesday-Friday, 11 a.m.-2 p.m. Tuesday-Thursday, 5-10 p.m. Friday, 5-midnight Saturday, 11 a.m. - midnight Sunday, noon-9 p.m.

INFO: (804) 560-9622
www.getlostmd.org

The Positive Vibe will be open for lunch and dinner six days a week, with training scheduled during unbusy hours. Profits will subsidize the training. Some who complete training will work at the Positive Vibe, but most will work at other restaurants in the community.

The whole operation is held together by veteran professionals such as head chef Rob Hamlin, who runs the kitchen, and other local restaurateurs who help with the training.

Early on, Larcen decided to make this a private venture, relying on the support -- and goodness -- of the community rather than the largesse of government agencies. The upshot is, no state or federal money is involved in Positive Vibe, but Larcen has had to scramble to raise the start-up money himself. He's knocked on doors and held auctions. Two-thirds of the \$300,000 required to design, build and equip the restaurant has come from donations, he said. Just about every piece of equipment, from the heating and air-conditioning units to the plasma TV behind the bar, has a story involving resourcefulness and generosity. Even the artwork comes with special meaning, having been provided as it is by VSA arts of Virginia, an organization that promotes creative expression by children and adults with disabilities.

"The community has really stepped up in a big way," said Larcen. "I wake up every day totally amazed."

The sign over the entrance says "Max's Positive Vibe Cafe." Explained Larcen, "He inspired it." Max works at the restaurant, serving as a host, greeting diners and showing them to their tables.

The 70-seat restaurant was planned with accessibility in mind for Max and others in wheelchairs -- from its automatic door at the entrance to the booths with tables that fold out. In the kitchen, an adjustable work station makes it easier for employees in wheelchairs to help prepare meals.

When I stepped into the kitchen the other night, Jesse Williams had his wheelchair rolled up to that table, where he was busy putting together Greek salads and desserts. Williams, paralyzed in a shooting, is so thrilled to have a job he volunteered to work a double shift the second day the restaurant was open.

"This is exciting," said Williams, who was one of the first to go through the formal Positive Vibe food-service training. "I'm enjoying myself."

He never stopped smiling the whole time we spoke.

Williams isn't the only one smiling.

Beth Conner, a transition coordinator with Chesterfield County Public Schools' Career and Transition Services, said the Positive Vibe is unlike anything she's seen in 28 years of helping students with disabilities find jobs.

"This is such a wonderful thing for people with disabilities," said Conner, who learned about Larcen's plans a couple of years ago and volunteered to help. Three of her students are working at the Positive Vibe and several other students from the program, under the guidance of other coordinators, also are employed as hosts, dishwashers or bussers. All have the assistance of job coaches as they learn.

"It's been a real challenge for us to find employment for these folks," Conner said. "They make great employees, but initially they need a lot of support to succeed. A lot of employers are not comfortable with disabled people and they feel like they don't have the time and the manpower to invest in that kind of training."

People with disabilities make up a third of Positive Vibe's staff. The other two-thirds, including the wait staff and bartenders, work for tips only, meaning they've bought into the mission of the place.

"They have to believe in what we're doing," Larcen said.

It's difficult finding someone involved with the restaurant who doesn't.

"We really feel a sense of ownership," said Conner, on behalf of her colleagues and students. "We were in from the beginning. We just feel like part of it is ours. We have a lot of time invested.

"And a lot of hope that it will succeed."

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