



News @ AsiaOne

Professor Brawn Cafe

Hires autistic teens as kitchen and wait staff. -ST

Tue, Mar 02, 2010
The Straits Times

As a senior vice-president at ST Telemedia, Mr Roland Tay was a high-flying head honcho.

Then in late 2008, he turned his back on million-dollar deals and moved into something smaller - much, much smaller.

Together with his wife, Member of Parliament Denise Phua, the 55-year-old opened Professor Brawn Cafe at Novena Square last October, a cosy eatery that hires autistic children to give them a shot at the working world.

The couple have an autistic son, Jun-Yi, 14, who is attending Pathlight, an autism-focused school started by Madam Phua. She now serves as its supervisor.

Mr Tay's decision to leave the corporate world, a move which sees him earning just 10 per cent of what he used to, was a response to what he calls a 'stirring in my heart'.

He says: 'I was envious of the meaning that my wife found in following her heart's desire and serving full-time in the autism community.'

Wanting to do something similar, he began looking around for possible business ventures that would allow him to serve the special-needs community.

By a stroke of luck, he came across a newspaper advertisement of a cafe in Novena Square for sale. He bought it over by September last year and proceeded to renovate and rebrand the place - a tall order for someone with little entrepreneurial experience.

He recalls good-naturedly: 'I had to take care of everything. It was unlike in my corporate days when there were many people to execute my ideas. I was indeed the 'chief executive officer' as I had to chiefly execute almost everything.'

The name Professor Brawn, incidentally, was inspired by the artistically talented Jun-Yi, who had once etched a drawing of a scholarly superhero.

The boy described the figure as 'strong, smart and kind', values worth championing through the business, says Mr Tay.

His initial outlay was \$200,000 but the money has gone a long way. 'We have already broken even operationally. Our cash takings can now sustain the daily operations.'

Explaining the cafe's aim, Madam Phua, 50, says: 'International research has shown that many adults with disabilities stay home due to poor education and lack of employer support.

'We want to beat this trend in Singapore and help as many of them lead meaningful adult lives by creating jobs in the marketplace.'

Despite being a high-profile advocate of the cause herself, it is now her husband who runs the show: 'It is my turn to support him. Sure, he earns loads less now, but money is not everything.'

Of the cafe's total staff strength of 13, three are autistic. They are paid market rates - equivalent to what they would earn at Starbucks, says Mr Tay, adding that special-needs employees should ideally make up 30 per cent of his workforce.

The unusual work environment comes with its challenges. Work processes, for example, have to be broken

down into manageable steps for these employees. They might also have run-ins with less tolerant customers, says Mr Tay.

But six months on, Professor Brawn has already left a positive imprint on 19-year-old autistic teen Huang Kai Song, who first started working in the kitchen but has since gained the confidence to wait on customers.

He says: 'It is a privilege to work here so I just want to get the job done.'

Copyright ©2010 [Singapore Press Holdings Ltd.](#) Co. Regn. No. 198402868E. All rights reserved.

[Privacy Statement](#) [Conditions of Access](#) [Advertise](#)