



Roland Tay and his special needs employees.

Owner Runs Café for Special Needs People

By Sadie-Jane Nunis

IN the 21st century, there was growing interest in corporate social responsibility, CSR, and social enterprise. Companies like The Body Shop have been practising CSR for years and have a proven success track record.

In Singapore, not many companies have picked up on CSR. Most view CSR as a means to donating money to their favourite charities or being green. There are other ways to participate and make it part of the organisation's norm. There are some who embrace social enterprise or CSR and make it part of their organisation's vision and mission. However, there are some unique individuals who decide

With Singapore's declining unemployment rate, it may come as a shock that there is a group of people who seem to be facing an employment problem. Having special needs or disabilities does seem to restrict the types of jobs they can do. Local companies should start opening up their minds and hearts to hire them. Professor Brawn Café is doing an excellent job in this area.

to leave the rat race altogether in order to truly make a change.

Roland Tay is one such person. A former high flyer at ST Telemedia, he left his job to pursue something close to his heart. Tay has another reason behind taking on his new life mission. His son is autistic. This was why he decided to go into the food and beverage industry and open the Professor Brawn Café. Current-

ly, the café is located on the second storey of Novena Square, at a rather strategic location. What's so special about this café and what is the link between a child with special needs and a café?

Truly Special Café

This writer has patronised the café numerous times. Not only is the food delicious but the decor is vibrant and



The café's vision and mission statement are scribbled on the wall.

filled with scribbles and a framed image of a superhero comic character. Tay beams proudly and says that the café logo was designed by his son who loves drawing and is artistic. Upon closer inspection, one will notice that the scribbles are the vision and mission of the business, and an explanation of what social enterprise is all about. On the walls, the business is described as being “based on the values of quality, dignity, and inclusiveness”. Its mission statement proudly states: “to provide affordable good food by an inclusive quality workforce comprising people of different abilities, ages, and socio-economic backgrounds”.

The café opened its doors on 15 October 2009. Tay teamed up with special needs Pathlight School to start this venture. Pathlight School helps autistic children gain skills and be educated in the mainstream curriculum. Both Tay and the school felt that those with special needs should be given a chance to have dignified jobs, and find a way to be independent by having a source of income on their own. Autistic kids excel in production and process-based jobs according to Tay. He highlights that these kids excel in jobs in the baking and light manufacturing fields. However, without the support from Pathlight School, it would have been difficult for him to have begun this venture alone.

Pathlight School caters for both mainstream curriculum and vocational training. Some of the training covers

skills like those needed in a café, baking, administration, design, and kiosk or small business management. For students who do well in the mainstream curriculum, most continue and go on to GCE “O” levels, “A” levels, or even move on to the Institute of Technical Education, ITE, or local polytechnics.

These children suffer from different levels of autism. There are some who excel at both mainstream curriculum and vocational studies so they take up both courses. Others can only focus on one area hence they continue in the area they excel in. However, most who do not make it to ITE or polytechnic after completing their studies, carry on with their vocational studies. Starbucks opened a café within Pathlight School so that students can experience what it is like to work at a café and have real hands-on experience.

Employment Model

Tay employs these students and elaborates on his café's employment model: “Our employment model can take up to five years. We look at factors like job assessment, job placement, and job support. Kids who are high functioning can take as little as a couple of weeks to understand the requirements of the job tasks. For the more severe cases, they tend to take much longer, even up to five years.”

“During these processes, Pathlight School lends its support throughout. The

students sign a contract but are still students at Pathlight. They are assessed on how they perform. They need to achieve a grade of at least 60 per cent in order to pass the module,” he says. When they are assigned to the job on a part-time basis, similar to that of an internship, a job coach will follow up and check on their progress. This can take three to four weeks. In total, they need to clock in 20 hours or 10 two-hour sessions.

Jobs are broken down into steps. They include waffle preparation, dish washing, busking tables, and the most challenging is customer service. Each process is clearly stated in words and a picture is attached which shows what is required for the task. Customer service tends to be tough for most of them as one of the challenges is knowing how to behave socially. Some tend to talk loudly or be too brash; hence they will be given a list of processes to follow and trained to handle customers.

To ensure that the work is carried out systematically, visual aids and support are provided. The physical structure of the café is labelled, for example, the salt shakers, ketchup bottles, and so forth. A work system is put into place and together with the step-by-step process; the staff are able to carry out their tasks efficiently and effectively. Tay says: “Once they are trained, they go into automatic mode. They like things to remain as they are as they do not adapt well to changes.” If they

are given a task, and the way it is taught the first few times, they will follow exactly the same way until they do another duty.

These kids, especially the higher functioning ones, tend to react very well to clearly stated processes. They adapt quickly and perform the tasks like a ritual. Tay elaborates that for those who help with preparations of ingredients for spaghetti, for example, if they are told to bag 120 grammes of spaghetti for each dish, you can be assured that you will get a portion that weighs exactly 120 grammes. They are meticulous to the core and the fact that they are consistent is a great asset.

Friendly and Efficient Staff

Amos joined the café in 2010. He is not a Pathlight student but Tay employed him. A few others on the team got a job at the café as their parents had appealed for a placement. A Roman Catholic nun had introduced two of them, Timothy and Thanek. They do not look any different from the average person and do not look like they have special needs. A chatty young man of 23, Amos has a routine. However, he sat down with us due to his curiosity for a chat, which Tay had to cut short because when Amos gets started, he can't stop. He was rather entertaining though. He was finishing his shift and was about to go home, however, he would clear the trash at the fixed time of 2.30 pm before leaving. He happily did his task, say hello to familiar faces as he walked past the shops. Every shift, at 2.30 pm, he would do this same task. I started to understand what Tay meant by his staff sticking to a routine and excelling at it.

Even at that time, there were still a couple of tables with customers. Tay says: "The key objective is that this business remains sustainable which will help us achieve our social mission of helping those with special needs. When planning

on where to open this café, we had to look at various success factors, namely, a location which is extremely crucial for an F&B outfit, quality of food, service, and the ambiance we create." Their customers patronise the café for two reasons. Firstly, it is because of the food. Not only are the portions generous but most items on the menu are delicious, especially the ribs and fish and chips. Secondly, many support the cause and think that the social mission is a great step forward to help those with special needs have a better future.

DoodleShop

He says: "Apart from being a café, they also sell merchandise designed by the students from Pathlight. If anyone buys the merchandise, the designer will be given royalty. T-shirts with the Professor Brawn image and notebooks with quirky designs are available." These are designed by six to eight students. There are more designs available on the DoodleShop Web site too as the café does not carry all the designs.

Ms Denise Phua, President of the Autism Resource Centre and Member of Parliament for Moulmein-Kallang GRC is very supportive of this cause. She says: "As someone previously from the training and consulting industry, I tend to find the food and beverage business to be one of the most difficult ones to operate viably. This is due to the low barrier to entry, low profit margin, manpower crunch, and numerous other factors. However, after having seen how Professor Brawn Café has been operated in the last one year or more, although there is not much money to be made, I find the flexibility in offering jobs to the special needs young adults so inspiring.

"I feel so much joy seeing Tay and his team giving these folks a chance to work out there in the real world and I am



Denise Phua, president of the Autism Resource Centre and MP for Moulmein-Kallang GRC.

still in awe that Professor Brawn Café is a reality. It is even more exciting that the model can now be scaled and a second Professor Brawn Café is underway at Circular Road. Even more can be employed and have a better future."

Need for Support

Tay hopes that more local small and medium-enterprises, SMEs, will hire them. In terms of human resource policies, most are the same as that of regular employees. He faces an insurance problem. No insurance company is supportive and they charge three times the premium per employee.

He cites the need for a cultural integration of these autistic individuals into society. More awareness needs to be raised to garner support. One of his other goals is to be able to hire more staff on a permanent basis as long as they are willing to work. The only issue is that owning and running a café is not an easy business. If SMEs come into the picture, there will be more chances for them to get jobs and awareness will be heightened.

"Local SMEs should take a chance on them. When they are well trained and with the support from the right partners, the special needs workforce can be a reliable and stable source of manpower. This is especially so in the face of a job market where jobs in the service sector such as the F&B sector, healthcare, estate maintenance, and security tend to shunned by locals," says Phua.

Hopefully, this will happen sooner rather than later as local SMEs and multinational franchise chains will be more open minded. They are truly missing out on employing this wonderful and efficient workforce. ✿



Items are labelled to make the job easier for the special needs employees.