

Dads in the Special Needs Community - Roland Tay



Dads for Life met with 2 trailblazing dads, [Khor Tuck Kuan](#) and Roland Tay, who have been lighting the path in the Special Needs community, to build acceptance, respect and a voice for people with disabilities. Here is Roland Tay's story.

Roland Tay, father of 2, is an IT and Telecoms systems businessman turned social entrepreneur.

Professor Brawn Café is his brainchild.

DFL: What is the Professor Brawn Cafe?

Roland: Professor Brawn is a social enterprise with a mission to provide special needs individuals with employment as well, as serve as a training ground where they can learn essential work life skills. However, for its mission to sustain, I am well aware that it must stay financially viable too.

The mascot of the cafe, Professor Brawn, is a superhero conceptualised and created by my son, Jun-Yi, who is autistic and is currently studying at Pathlight School. Jun-Yi created his superhero to be 'smart, kind and strong'.

DFL: Why did you decide to venture into the F&B business?

Roland: The challenges faced by people with special needs make them less appealing to potential employers but when properly trained and supported, they can be assets; for example, they are best suited for employment that requires structure and routine, like manufacturing and baking. The initial stages of setting up the cafe, from renovations to working on the food, and especially selecting and training the autistic individuals for employment, have been stressful, but nonetheless rewarding because of the business's social purpose.

I was indeed the Chief Executive Officer, chiefly executing everything.

DFL: How does Professor Brawn cater to special needs?

Roland: When the cafe first started, I had 3 Pathlight School graduates working for me. Today I have 20 young adults with special needs, working at both outlets in Novena Square and Boat Quay. Some of them have intellectual disability; others have visual or hearing impairment. Each shift sees a 50-50 ratio of special needs and regular staff. The special needs staff are being paid normal wages.



Roland Tay with Professor Brawn



In order to work effectively with the autistic staff, my other staff have been specially trained by experts from the Autism Resource Centre (ARC). Everyone joining Professor Brawn must have a heart for people with special needs.

The art decking the walls of Professor Brawn at Novena Square is done by the talented teachers of Pathlight School.

Behind-the-scenes interactions in Professor Brawn are systems and processes. Experts from the ARC have assessed the cafe to make it autism work-friendly. For example, having visual and color-coded step by step recipes for making drinks, soups and sauces.

DFL: How has this business been fulfilling for you?

Roland: Yes, it is the most fulfilling job I ever had! I will never return to corporate life. Working for this cause is so much more fulfilling.

You see people with special needs start work here scared and timid, but they are transformed 1-2 years later, having grown in confidence and self-esteem.

I am inspired by them. Business has picked up since I started. The good food and ambience have been getting positive reviews. We get repeat customers also because they believe in the cause.

As a father, I am glad that my son Jun-Yi likes to hang out here. It is a place where he feels affirmed and is respected. He likes the food here and sometimes helps with simple food preparation and washing in the kitchen.



Brisk business at Professor Brawn on a Saturday afternoon.

Here at Professor Brawn, we have turned a perceived weakness of autistic people into a strength. For instance, by tapping on their penchant for repetitive, meticulous tasks to produce consistently good sauces, soup, coffee, peeled potatoes ... we are effectively harnessing their unique and innate ability to produce consistent food quality to work for us for good.

My hope for my staff is that they work with me long term, grow the business with me so we can help more people who are like them. I want them to inspire other people with special needs and transform their lives in turn.

Professor Brawn is located at Novena Square and Boat Quay. It serves affordable set lunches, and its signature dishes are fish and chips, vongole and the sausage and rosti set. Roland's personal favourite is the barbecued pork ribs. The Boat Quay branch is available for private events. The 2 outlets are located at:

*Professor Brawn Cafe @ Novena Outlet
#02-78/79 Novena Square,
238 Thomson Road Singapore 307683*

*Opening Hours: 11.30am to 9:30pm Daily, Mon to Sun
For reservations: pls call at (65) 6253 4650*

*Professor Brawn Cafe @ Boat Quay Outlet
10 Circular Rd Singapore 049366*

Opening Hours: 11am to 10pm Mon to Fri

Closed on Saturdays, Sundays and Public Holidays*

** Saturdays will be open for group bookings of minimum 20 guests with advance notice of at least 1 week.*

For reservations: pls call at (65) 6532 0607

For enquiries/reservations via email:

enquiries@professorbrawn.com

Visit website at <http://www.professorbrawn.com> for more details including photos, news and rave reviews.

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About the Author: The Dads for Life Resource Team comprises local content writers and experts, including psychologists, counsellors, educators and social service professionals, dedicated to developing useful resources for dads.
