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Cafe isn't just satisfying java joneses

Nonprofit Ventana del Soul working toward becoming a community center

Headline Story
By Robert Inks

It offers coffee from Texas Coffee Traders, sandwiches made with loaves from Texas French Bread, pastries from Round Rock Donuts and even Amy's Ice Cream. The work of local artists adorns the walls, and the songs of local musicians play through the speakers.

But the name, which means "Window to the Soul," suggests a larger purpose for the facility, and for director Clare Fleming, java is just the beginning. The nonprofit coffee shop is a way to pay the overhead costs for what Fleming hopes will be a successful southeast Austin community center, complete with art shows, concerts, meeting centers, classes and workshops.

"Technically, we're actually a school," Fleming said. "Just a crazy, whacked-out, hit-you-when-you're-not-looking school."

Fleming and her friends Mike Viesca and Steve Wolf formed Ventana del Soul initially to create a venue for vocational classes for people in the surrounding community.

As the publisher of Cuisine Scene Magazine, a local restaurant guide, Fleming said she routinely saw businesses close because their proprietors lacked basic management and accounting experience. So Fleming decided to provide classes to teach small business owners those skills.

"I would be sitting down with restaurant owners, and they would just break down and cry because they were going out of business," Fleming said. "Running a restaurant is not just making great enchiladas. There's an administrative side, too."

As the education center began to expand into a community meeting place, businesses began to donate time and services - as well as furniture - toward renovating the building on the corner of East Oltorf Street and Burleson Road. Nearly everything in the shop, from the chairs to the lights to the glass display cases for the pastries, was donated.

The facility also depends on donated time for many of its administrative operations. Fleming employs about 15 college



Media Credit: Sunil Lavani

Amber Leyendecker, who has been working at Ventana del Soul on East Oltorf Street since it opened, serves a pastry to Toni Moreno, a recent UT graduate. To the untrained eye, Ventana del Soul is merely the embodiment of how local a local coffee shop can be.

interns every semester to do public relations, accounting and advertising work.

Amber Vandergriff, a public relations senior, said she met Fleming as an intern for Cuisine Scene Magazine and became involved in Ventana del Soul in its beginning stages. She helped develop ideas to fund the center and did research for the corporation's nonprofit mission statement.

"I've gotten a lot of good experience here, and not all of it has been in public relations," Vandergriff said. "A lot of it has been stressful, but stressful in a good way."

Currently, the facility offers yoga workshops Saturday mornings, world music Thursday nights and meeting places for nonprofit and charity groups. They also host concerts and food drives in an upstairs auditorium.

Fleming said she hopes to install a computer classroom soon and to begin vocational classes in January.

Despite her big plans for the facility, Fleming said making Ventana del Soul a comfortable place to be will be the first step toward success.

"We've tried to make a place where everyone feels like they belong," Fleming said. "We don't even mention the education side to people until after this place catches them."

Fleming is hoping it catches more people than it has so far. After being open for three months, the coffee shop is currently about one-third of the way to meeting the day-to-day costs of running the facility, and the center is always in need of volunteers and donations, she said. While Fleming can pay her employees and (most of the time) her vendors, she hasn't yet received a paycheck herself.

Her reward so far, Fleming said, is the fun she has with the job.

"I work something like 80 hours a week at this place, so it has to be fun," she said. "This is the biggest, most exciting project I've ever worked on, and if there is anything that I've done that was ever meant to happen, this is it."