

Tall cup of espresso with room for life skills

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For many teenagers, high school is their first glimpse into the real world, giving them the skills they will need when they grow up and start their careers. And thanks to a new venture known as the Green Scene Cafe, special education students at Wilson High School are getting that same opportunity.



by: CONNECTION PHOTO: VERN UYETAKE - Sophomore Jake Ross prepares a latte for a Wilson High School staff member.

The Green Scene Cafe is a fully operational coffee shop — housed in the Wilson cafeteria and staffed by students in Dominic Le Fave’s life skills program.

Le Fave said it fills a crucial void.

“When I was first came to Wilson as a special education teacher, there was very little in the way of vocational study and chances for kids to study meaningful vocational skills,” he said. “So I really started looking for a kind of a classroom lab that would actually be doing meaningful work.”

A coffee shop seemed like the perfect opportunity.

“Once you get into a project like that, it’s pretty amazing to realize how much curriculum can be tied into it,” Le Fave said. “If you think about running the business, there’s all kinds of practical math. There’s even science in terms of looking at food

handling, and even the physics of something like an espresso machine, and there’s geography in terms of learning about the different coffee regions and the cultures that produce them, and, really, the global system that supports something like a coffee shop.

“There’s been all kinds of language arts projects built around this. They’ve worked on marketing, advertising campaigns that have involved lots of vocational writing, and, even, we’re ... taking the idea of a coffee shop as a cultural institution and expanding it that way.”

One such pursuit is “The Green Zine,” a literary journal consisting of student submissions and juried, edited and produced by the life skills students. There will be prizes for Best Poem, Best Fiction, Best B&W Art or Photography and Best Creative Non-Fiction, with each winner awarded a free cafe drink of their choice delivered to them in class once per day for a week.

Wilson Principal Brian Chatard commended Le Fave.

“Don made it happen — a teacher with a vision and some creativity and a willingness to really do what those kids need, which is to create a real environment. ... A student is motivated to learn regardless of their ability when what they’re learning is relevant to them. Don has created a real cafe, and it’s relevant for the life skills that those individual students are going to need and use and have when they get out of school.”

Why coffee?

“Portland really is a coffee town,” Le Fave said. “It’s great the kids learn food service — food handling and things like that — but in this town, just being an established and accomplished barista gains you respect in this culture, and I see it in the school: These kids are operating the coolest thing here. That was always my vision for the vocational program, to take these kids and put them at the center of the most cool things in the school.”

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The state-of-the-art espresso maker used by the Green Scene Cafe was paid for by a fundraising campaign led by Le Fave on DonorsChoose.org.

“Right now we can do anything that Starbucks can, and I think we do it better — except for frozen drinks,” he said. “We would love to have an icemaker so we could get into that.”

Cups and counsel on coffee shop operations have been lent by Bob Rhoads of Stumptown Coffee.

Located off Wilson’s life skills classroom, the Green Scene Cafe is open to faculty and staff throughout the day. And it recently opened for business during Wilson’s Friday tutor time, so students can enjoy a cup of joe too.

"It’s a beautiful, beautiful program, and those students are so happy to learn those skills to be able to deliver during school, their own self-advocacy is totally through the roof," Chatard said. "It’s a model kind of program for life skills students anywhere."

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