

Coffee shop serves hope to people recovering from addiction

19 July 2018, by Michael Rubinkam

A Pennsylvania town's newest coffee shop is offering people recovering from opioid addiction a fresh start, one steaming cup of java at a time.

Hope & Coffee began serving customers Thursday morning in Tamaqua, a small coal-region town about 85 miles (137 kilometers) from Philadelphia.

In some ways, Hope & Coffee looks like any other hip cafe with its vintage parquet floors, leather sofas, free wi-fi and gourmet coffee beans. But this is coffee with a twist: People in recovery renovated the 1865 Victorian home, built the coffee bar, supply the beans and serve as the nonprofit coffee shop's managers and baristas.

Upstairs rooms will offer space for recovery meetings. Eventually, officials hope the cafe will fund an endowment to match people in early recovery with other area employers.

It's the brainchild of a successful business leader who's been sober for more than 35 years and became dismayed as the opioid epidemic gripped her hometown.

Lisa Scheller, chairwoman of a company that manufactures metallic pigments, pledged \$300,000 to get Hope & Coffee up and running. She said Thursday she had to take off her own "coat of shame and anonymity" about her distant past to get involved and "shine the brightest light to show that addiction can happen to anyone, and recovery is possible. Not just for me, but for everyone who embraces it."

Tamaqua, like other small towns throughout Pennsylvania's coal region, has long struggled with opioid addiction. Eric Zizelmann, a funeral home director, estimates that one in 10 deaths in Tamaqua last year was related to drugs.

Officials say they're under no illusion that Hope & Coffee will solve the drug crisis.

Instead, the idea is help remove the stigma that follows people in recovery, said Micah Gursky, executive director of the Tamaqua Area Community Partnership, a local development agency that runs the coffeehouse.

"We want this to be a place where you are helping normalize recovery, support people in recovery, let people know there are very successful people in recovery all around us, just by doing nothing more than coming to the coffee shop and having a cup of coffee," he said.

Coffee shop supervisor Sica Brown said she was addicted to heroin for years and spent time in jail. Now in recovery, and the single mother of a 1-year-old, Brown said nobody wanted to hire her.

"Everybody loved me in person, but as soon as they ran a background check and looked at my history, my past, they didn't want to have anything to do with me," said Brown.

She was attending intensive outpatient therapy when someone handed her a flyer advertising job openings at Hope & Coffee. She called it an "absolute life-changer."

"My son now has a mother who has confidence, who has an amazing foundation," she said. "It was like the whole world was against me until I was handed that flyer."

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