

## **Cafe serves up confidence**

### **A catering scheme in Southport is working wonders for students with learning difficulties, Mary Hampshire reports**

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A steady stream of customers flows into Cafe Arden in the seaside resort of Southport on Merseyside. A specials menu offers hearty fare: cream of vegetable soup, liver and onion casserole with mashed potatoes, and sweet and sour chicken with rice. Catering students Andrew McLean, 20, and Rebekah Jessiman, 22, stroll the aisles taking orders.

The cafe is run by Arden College, a national specialist college, which provides education and care for 45 residential and 14 day students aged 16 to 25 with learning and behavioural difficulties. Cafe Arden was set up to develop students' social skills and their self-confidence, and to help them achieve national vocational qualifications and improve their long-term employment prospects.

"I think it's brilliant here - I like serving the customers," enthuses Andrew, a fourth-year student who confidently greets customers. Andrew began working at the cafe part-time three years ago and has completed an NVQ level 1 (GCSE equivalent) in catering, and has acquired basic numeracy and literacy skills. His tutors say he is outgoing and sociable and can express himself more clearly since he began working at the cafe. Andrew makes his own way to and from work and his aspiration is to become a chef.

Rebekah, also in her fourth year, used to be very shy. Now she is comfortable talking to customers and is also completing an NVQ level 1 in catering. As a result, Rebekah has another placement at a local community centre lined up with the possibility of paid part-time employment when she leaves college.

Cafe manager Sandra Wood, a former catering manager and social worker, says: "I see enormous changes in the students. When Andrew first came here, I had to lead him to the tables and coax him to talk to the customers and take the orders. "Now he's very much at ease and is able to do everything without assistance. Rebekah used to be painfully shy - so much so that she wouldn't speak to customers."

Bright and airy, the cafe is decorated in yellow, with orange lilies and vibrant jazz prints, and attracts a loyal following of customers. "The youngsters are absolutely fantastic," says Alan Smith, a retired hotelier from Southport. "Quite frankly, they behave better than people I've met in the business. They're smashing; they're natural and they're polite. "It's always busy in here. I like it because it's a friendly

environment - we always bump into someone we know - and it's no smoking. The food's good. You get a decent cup of tea and cakes to die for at a reasonable price."

Up to four students work at the cafe every day. Duties include laying tables, greeting customers, taking orders, serving food and drinks, preparing food, devising menus, cleaning and cashing up. They have the opportunity to study for NVQ levels 1 and 2.

Chris Mayho, general manager of Arden College, says: "Students work in a realistic environment and develop their personal and work skills. It's a tremendous confidence booster. "It gives students the opportunity to say, 'Yes, I can do it.' It also enhances their independence. Many have never been given the chance to succeed because other people have had low expectations of them. "We give them second and third chances to succeed and we see huge improvements. The families really notice it. One student's parents initially thought there was no point in work experience. "They wondered why the student should bother. But now they are really encouraging because the student has achieved more than the parents ever imagined."

Nine out of 10 students have no qualifications when they begin at Arden College, which is owned by Craegmoor Healthcare and which takes students identified by the Learning and Skills Council funding categories as having challenging emotional and behavioural needs. By the time they leave, those who are able will have achieved an NVQ and completed work experience. The curriculum, which provides learning and care tailored to individual needs, also tackles essential life skills such as communication, behaviour management and independent living.

Richard Marrs, 19, who has worked at Cafe Arden and is completing an NVQ level 1 in catering, is a good example. He was desperately shy, having difficulty talking to people and making eye contact. But after working at the cafe he applied for work experience at Pizza Hut and went along for an interview. He has learnt how to see a task through from beginning to end and is much more comfortable when meeting new people in unfamiliar places.

The cafe is one of several work placement options. Others include fast-food outlets, the local botanical gardens, Southport Football Club, kennels, a riding school, a community centre and a hospital nursery. Wayne Driscoll, 19, works part-time at Southport FC. He is studying horticulture and his duties include looking after the ground and preparing kit for the players."I'm really into football," says Wayne. "I feel very happy. My parents are really proud of me."

Pauline May, head of catering at Arden College, says: "We tell the workplace provider what targets the students are working towards so they can monitor their development and record the evidence. "Each week they put in a report detailing the students' daily activities. Some placements have been more difficult to

arrange than others. We have had noes because not every employer has the time. But some have been inspired by the students' enthusiasm." She adds: "One of the greatest things students achieve is a sense of belonging to a team. The employers feel they're giving something back to the community. But it's not just a one-way street. The students are an asset. They have a lot to offer, too."