

## **Diversability Award Entrant: Coffee Educators Ltd**

When Coffee Educators Ltd was first recognised at the Diversity Awards NZ for its work training and employing members of the Deaf community in all aspects of the coffee industry, owner and self-described “boss lady” Claire Matheson declared her ambition to share the company’s vision with the community by setting up a school.

Two years on she has done that and more - Coffee Educators trained more than 140 students with a range of physical, mental and neurological disabilities in its Training Centres in Wellington and Christchurch, teaching them how to make coffee and how to operate in a diverse environment, and has provided customer service-based New Zealand Sign Language (NZSL) training for all its learners.

It’s also helping other employers to work in a more diverse manner - last year one of Coffee Educators’ profoundly deaf staff members came to Auckland to help Fairfax Media set up its Roost Coop coffee kiosk, which is now operating with Deaf staff members and used the company’s sign language videos to teach customers to order in NZSL.

The company’s work with Deaf trainees began when Claire was asked to provide some coffee training for Deaf students at Newlands College, a co-ed secondary school in Wellington, who often struggled to find courses suitable for them.

Rather than just providing a short course, Claire delivered a three-day learning programme with a sign language interpreter and trained four year 12 and 13 students to make coffee. It opened her eyes, she says, to the barriers that the Deaf community faces.

Today, as well as the training centres, Coffee Educators operates the Co’Ed on Queens café in Lower Hutt, and its workforce includes six members who are profoundly Deaf and another eight who identify as having a physical or mental disability. All hearing members of the team, and their partners, are provided with NZSL classes, paid for by the business.

Establishing a working environment where everyone can shine is only part of Co’Ed’s mission, Claire says. “We also aim to educate the public on how to be good customers.”

“Working in close proximity with someone who processes information in a different way has made me appreciate how bad we are at being customers. Mobile phones cover our mouths and lack of eye contact means we often look away when placing our orders. For someone who relies on reading lips this can create confusion.”

The language barrier was a huge issue for productivity of the business, but it dawned on Claire and her team that they had a captive audience who had no choice but to wait for their coffee to be made. So Co’Ed employed a multimedia designer, Deaf, of course, to create NZSL videos featuring their team. Customers can learn how to sign their order while they wait for their coffee.



Formerly the Equal Employment  
Opportunities Trust

Co'Ed shared those same videos on Facebook during New Zealand Sign Language Week and in less than seven days, recorded 46,000 views.

Part of the solution is making customers aware, in a light-hearted way, that they are speaking to a Deaf person.

"We were not up for wearing badges or t-shirts and you won't find any signs in our café. There needs to be a level of respect and we strive to make diversity and inclusion the new normal," says Claire.

"Instead we opt for discussion and keeping an ear open for what our customers are saying. We have worked to take the fear out of ignorance. People are scared to get things wrong in case they offend people but if we don't know, we don't know."

Claire is proud of the progression her diverse staff are making within the business. Julz, who is profoundly deaf, has been managing the Co'Ed on Kings café for almost three years. "She had worked in coffee previously but no one would ever give her the chance to progress as they were worried her deafness would hold her back. We've found the opposite. She is strong and determined and an inspiration to all our staff and students."

Positions have been specifically designed within the business to allow staff to follow their dreams.

"Our multimedia designer applied for a job at the cafe because he had heard we were a Deaf-friendly employer. When I asked to see his CV I saw that he was the head of the Deaf Sports Association, had represented New Zealand at the Deaflympics and had extensive experience as a designer. At the time he was working part time as a waiter as he had struggled to find a job in his chosen field after he moved from Auckland to Wellington.

"It was apparent an entry-level cafe position was a waste of his talents. It was at that point that we established his position, when he had input on its development and growth. Of course, he learnt to make coffee too but that's a total bonus!

"I am truly blessed to have a team who share my vision for an inclusive society and give their all to making it a reality."

Video Link: <https://vimeo.com/album/4446506/video/229799480>