

Diversability Award Winner: Coffee Educators (Co-Ed)

Video Link: <https://vimeo.com/137552481>

Coffee doesn't discriminate. Co-Ed Café and Coffee Educators, based in Wellington, was established in May 2014 by Claire Matheson and Daniel Burford, a couple of coffee enthusiasts. Claire's mission is to provide information and education on all aspects of coffee preparation and service to anyone who shares her interest.

Co-Ed is a trading café and Coffee Educators a training facility for baristas, providing training to individuals, corporate groups, schools and coffee companies. The café itself is a unique environment where customers can see baristas in training, ask questions and learn more about their coffee experience.

Claire's exciting new business is also unique because three out of her six staff are profoundly deaf.

The influence of the Deaf community on Claire's business began whilst working with Newlands College, a co-educational secondary school in Wellington. It was through discussions with Newlands College that Claire was asked to provide some kind of 'café experience' for their deaf students who often struggle to find courses that are suitable for them.

"I have always had a strong belief that coffee doesn't discriminate," says Claire. "Whilst working in the UK I had taught a woman with physical disabilities to make coffee and thought, was there any reason why a person with no hearing couldn't actually make coffee?"

Rather than just provide a 'café experience' for the students, Claire developed a three-day course with a sign language interpreter and trained four year 12 and 13 students to make coffee. "I was immediately taken with how much attention to detail the students paid to the processes, their natural dexterity and ability to work in a focussed manner without distraction," says Claire. "It was a life, and career, changing experience for me".

Claire's work with Newlands College opened her eyes to the barriers that the Deaf community face. In order to assist deaf students to reach their full potential, Claire is currently putting together coffee training programmes specifically for those who are hearing impaired and has employed a designer to assist in writing manuals which will be user friendly.

"It is virtually impossible for a deaf student to achieve in a hearing course with an interpreter who may not know specifically about the given subject," Claire observes. "Yet if training is designed for deaf and presented to hearing then both parties should achieve equally well."

Tagi was one student from Newlands College who began work at Co-Ed on Saturdays. She taught the staff some signs so they could communicate orders efficiently and the whole team is now encouraged to learn and to use New Zealand Sign Language, with the company paying for their courses. Tagi now works 2/3 days per week between Co-Ed and Little Cafe.

It is not only the team who are benefitting, customers are also embracing the opportunity to communicate differently. For example, the Manager of Co-Ed, Julz, lip-reads, so if a customer turns away whilst ordering or is on the phone, she may misunderstand their order. Customers at Co-Ed are encouraged to fully engage with staff and they are even being given the opportunity to learn how to order in sign. Co-Ed is working with a company called POSBOSS, who design their till system, to produce a secondary iPad for customers so they can access videos with instructions on how to sign their order.

Business author Simon Sinek once said "customers will never love a company until the employees love it first." This is a saying that Claire has definitely heeded and has restructured many processes within the café to accommodate her employees' unique needs. She has invested in systems to make working life easier for all staff and create a seamless experience for customers.

Co-Ed and the Coffee Educators is going from strength to strength. Recently, the organisation took over the lease of Little Café at the War Memorial Library and Little Theatre. Part of this decision was to provide Alex Robinson, a profoundly deaf trainee chef, with the opportunity to have a commercial kitchen to learn and work in. Previously Alex was on benefits, but thanks to Co-Ed's ethos and with the support of the Ministry of Social Development, he is now employed full-time. Co-Ed are currently looking for a chef to work with Alex to develop his skills.

They have also just won the tender for the new Taita Sports and Community Centre, a \$12.5m Hutt City Council project to design a café and kitchen which meets the specific needs of staff, as well as customers, who have a hearing impairment. This facility aims to represent New Zealand's three official languages and be a full training facility.

Thanks to Claire's vision, her business has greatly benefitted from a diverse workforce. As a training provider the diversity they show has helped to win new contracts, whilst Co-Ed has a regular customer base of people who are deaf or have a hearing impairment who come to support the team and what they are doing. Others come to practice their sign, or just to enjoy fantastic coffee made by a dedicated and unique team.