

Roxana's Café de Shell

What began as an activity for students in Roxana High School's functional life skills class, quickly evolved into a work-skills "classroom" and social gathering place for all students at the high school. Café de Shell, located in the lower level of the campus (the old cafeteria), is a genuine, student run coffee and cookie shop, serving students and staff, as well as members of the community. Freshly ground coffee and just-baked cookies, with the backdrop of blues and jazz music and student artwork displayed throughout, greet students as they enter the café. The café, sponsored by the Roxana High School S.T.E.P. (Student Training Experience Program), provides an opportunity to gain valuable work experience for students with disabilities; ranging from mild learning disabled to developmentally disabled. During lunch periods, general education students also operate the café.

Café de Shell, named after the school mascot, The Shells, came to life last winter after Roxana Student Training Experience Program (S.T.E.P.) coordinator Tim Converse acquired an Otis Spunkmeyer cookie oven for the school's functional life skills class. Mr. Converse credits Madison County S.T.E.P. director, Mickie Watkins, who was trying to get someone, anyone, to undertake the cookie baking endeavor. Mr. Converse initially assumed the cookie operation would strictly be a life skills operation. However, as is the case, next came coffee, through a contract with Ronocco, and then a place to sell and enjoy the warm cookies and fresh bean; the café was born. Students from the S.T.E.P. program worked with the school's maintenance department to build the café, which is comprised of a service counter, coffee station, along with counters and tables for students to gather. The kitchen area is expansive, having the sinks and countertops from the previous cafeteria.

Students open the shop sharply at 7:00, grind and brew the coffee, bake the cookies, and ready the café for the students. Throughout the day, two-person shifts operate the café, while working with and training the functional life skills students. "The idea was to involve multi-step task operations to prepare a wide array of students to work independently and as a team," stated Mr. Converse. A student with Aspergers Syndrome may be baking cookies, while his classmate with Down's Syndrome sweeps the floor, as a student with a learning disability is calculating the day's monetary success. All of this is done under the watchful eye of the high school's do-all paraprofessional, Laura Kwider, who directs and assigns students tasks and responsibilities of the café; everything from opening and closing, to checking inventory and ordering the supplies. "Without Mrs. Kwider," says Converse, "the café most likely wouldn't have materialized."

Besides the obvious employment skills students learn, the social attribute has been huge. Laura Ballard, the Roxana district special education director, whose support was influential in starting the café, is pleasantly surprised nearly every day by the students' success in the shop. "Besides providing opportunities for our students with special needs," states Ballard, "the café has become a social junction for all students in the high school to interact with each other. In the morning especially, I see all kinds of kids interacting with other students, teachers, and school employees. The environment just allows for that kind of experience to occur."

To compound the success, the Shell Corporation, the previous tenants of the nearby refinery, recently awarded the district a \$50,000 grant to be used in the new student center adjacent from Café de Shell. Other area high school STEP programs, such as Triad and Highland are also experiencing success with the cookie oven, while Bethalto and Collinsville plan to start baking this year.

The money earned from the café, which varies since Mr. Converse gives too many cookies away, goes back into the S.T.E.P. program to finance supplies, other projects around and within the community, as well as work related materials that many students lack; work boots, appropriate clothing for jobs, and bus passes.

“At first I was worried that we’d never sell our minimum monthly cookie allotment - that I’d be stuck with all of these frozen cookies. In reality, we’re just happy the delivery truck comes twice a week.” Tim Converse, café entrepreneur and...educator.