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Cafe nourishes body and soul

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The Christmas "feel-good" season happens once a year in most business establishments, but if you ask the customers at One World Cafe, they'll tell you it always feels like the spirit of giving in their favorite haunt.

Literally. In fact, that's what runs the place. There's no price board and no cash register. Just a simple brown basket near the water jug where diners deposit their cash, no questions asked.

Yet Denise Cerreta didn't set out to turn a business model on its head when she opened the tiny cafe downtown, on the ground floor of a building that's seen better days.

She was catering to students at the Utah College of Massage Therapy and residents of the area around 300 East between South Temple and 100 South, serving up sandwiches, burritos and nachos, along with the coffee she had originally envisioned would be popular in her location.

Seven years of previous work in the same building as an acupuncturist with her own clinic had paid the bills, but she wasn't satisfied with it anymore.

"I felt like I had reached my spiritual ceiling in that vocation," she said, "and I had to move on for my own growth."

She needed a change, and the cafe offered her the chance to interact with people in a whole new way. But even with a bustling crowd of diners most days, there was still something missing in her soul as she re-fashioned her lifestyle and career.

So, the Ohio native she set out to find it, though she wasn't sure exactly what she was embarking on when she first decided to toss out her menu.

"I did it at first out of pure selfishness," she says, remembering the boredom that had set in. "I'm not a robot, and I decided I wasn't going to



Denise Cerreta, second from right, chats with a customer at her One World Cafe, which lets customers decide portion size and how much to pay for their food.

Laura Seitz, Deseret Morning News

cook the same thing every day."

The change seemed satisfying at first, as she switched to organic foods and cooked up whatever soups and salads and quiches fit with the ingredients she could procure on any given day. But when 95 percent of her business evaporated along with the menu, and she was working three shifts a day, seven days a week, she began to wonder.

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an encounter with the divine. She calls it inspiration from a higher power, her own "Field of Dreams" experience, where she "just knew" if she followed it, customers would come.

She can't say if she actually heard a voice, or if it was simply by inspiration. But a past experience with an inner voice she failed to heed, warning her of danger, resulted in a severe injury. After that, she had promised herself if she ever heard the voice again, she would follow it.

Yet what she heard startled even the free spirit inside her.

It told her to get rid of her price board and cash register and let customers decide how much to pay for their food.

"I knew I needed to go to donations," she says, smiling, still seeming somewhat astonished herself as she explains the prompting. "I think we all have that ability" to hear a prompting from a higher source. "But I don't think we listen to it."

Yet listen she did.

Even so, it was no small leap of faith to follow through on the impression.

"I closed my clinic a split second before God just kicked me off the ledge. It was scary," she said. "People say you're so brave and just an inspiration, but it wasn't my idea."

Still, it was her choice. Customers pay by conscience. A simple brown basket near the water jug serves as the cash collection point.

It's been sitting there since last spring, and her cafe still has no name on the window, nor does she do any kind of advertising. Her clientele has simply grown by word of mouth. Located at 41 S. 300 East, customers find her by looking for the building with a flag of the globe hanging near the window and a hand-painted "cafe open" sandwich board sitting on the curb outside.



Denise Cerreta, serving lasagna at One World Cafe, says her goal is to solve world hunger.

Business types always wonder how she's stayed afloat, but Cerreta doesn't hesitate to explain that people are fair, no matter what their circumstance, when they believe you're trying to do good by them.

Her clientele ranges from homeless people, who panhandle for the money they put in her basket for coffee and a bit of bread, to students, nearby residents, attorneys and physicians.

Laura Seitz, Deseret Morning News

"That's the beauty of it. And everybody is fair. It doesn't matter if they're making \$4,000, \$40,000 or \$400,000, that's the point. They put a fair price" on what they eat, she says.

And because customers choose their own portions of everything on the plate, there's very little waste.

"They go away satisfied without feeling guilty."

Loyal customers are her best advertising, often come accompanied by a friend who "heard so much about this place I had to see it for myself." As a result, she's made enough money not only to keep it open but to hire four full-time employees. Dishwashers are often students, who trade labor for their meals, or homeless people who help her keep up the yard outside the building and take out the trash.

She plans to plant a garden to grow her own fresh produce next spring and knows she won't have to spend much time there because there will always be those looking to trade work for food. Cerreta is always happy to oblige.

Her favorite part of the job is actually serving the food, she said, because it gives her a chance not just to cook with care but to labor with love for those who come inside. She hopes to help change people's relationships with food, she said, by infusing her own health consciousness not only into the mixture of ingredients but into the portion sizes and the demeanor with which she serves it up.

On the day this writer was there, the menu consisted of vegetarian minestrone and potato soups, quiche, spinach and carrot salads, chicken pot pie, chicken salad, various breads, pumpkin pie, cookies, organic fruit, coffee and other drinks.

Her "no waste" policy offers a clue into the essence of what customers feel inside the cafe. "Whatever is left over at the end of the day is packaged up and set outside for people in need" with no expectation of anything other than goodwill in return.

She smiles. "It's always gone in the morning."

But it's more than the portions-to-fit and the pay-as-you-decide policy that Cerreta believes keeps her clientele growing.

There's a "one-world" feel about the place that's difficult to describe, she admits, but most everyone who comes inside comments on it.

It may have something to do with how her idea of what is "enough" has changed in the past few months. "I live in a one-bedroom apartment with heat and lights and running water, and that's more than enough for me." As for her business model, "I wouldn't go back (to menus and a cash register) for anything. I want to see this grow. My goal is to help solve world hunger."

She hopes to open a second cafe on Salt Lake City's west side "near the homeless shelter" in the near future.

Though she doesn't claim membership in any one faith tradition, Cerreta believes "we can all be more Christ-like, rather than just looking to Christ to do something for the masses. Our communion with the divine is how we can personally be more like Christ or Buddha. It's that we're all divine and we can live that out."

And Denise Cerreta looks to be doing just that, one plate at a time.