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NEW WESTERNERS

Salt Lake City's One World Cafe: Food For All

By Contributing Writer, 4-05-06

By Greer Hitch

Swing open the glass door to the One World Café and you'll see prep cooks chopping vegetables and serving food while people wait in line to pick out what they'd like from the day's offerings. Professionals in suits, students with books and mothers with their children sit at small tables on the outskirts of the kitchen area. Laughter is heard further back through one of the doorways. The scene is the nearly perfect picture of a

small café in the city. Besides some ordinary props that are missing -- a menu, a cash register, prices -- the to and fro of the café moves like a comfortable dance. The owner, Denise Cerreta, choreographs the dance, but the uniqueness of this place came from a small but determined voice in the back of her head. Call it conscience, or fate. Call it whatever you like, but this small whisper is about to make its voice heard -- loud and clear.

Let's go back a few years when Cerreta ran an acupuncture clinic out of the same small brick building at 41 S. and 300 East. One day a man came in and wanted to rent one of her rooms in order to do massage and Aikido classes. She agreed and eventually decided to participate. One day, as she was setting herself up to do a forward roll, she heard a small voice in the back of her head with a precautionary tone saying, "don't do this forward roll." She ignored it, and moments later she ripped her groin. She made a solemn promise to herself: If she ever heard that small voice again, she would listen to it -- no matter what.

Skip forward a few months and Cerreta's acupuncture clinic, which she'd lost her passion for, has been converted into a small sandwich shop. She's been working tooth and nail, long days and long nights—the epitome of a small-business owner. The same glass door opens as another patron walks in and with the breeze comes an energy. Cerreta hears the small voice in the back of her head again, only this time the tone isn't a warning, it's a firm suggestion. "Go to donations. Let people price their own food." Remembering the promise she'd made to herself, she told the next person who ordered that they could pay what they thought their meal was worth. And the beginning of the One World Café and all its uniqueness was born.

"Once I did that (went to donations), my heart chakra expanded, and I realized what my larger purpose was," says Cerreta. "I knew I was going to try to eliminate hunger in my lifetime." While the epiphany came quickly, the work to push her idea forward took sheer grunt. Like when her car got repossessed and she had to walk to Wild Oats and carry all her groceries on her back, or her long days, or the fact that she had zero restaurant experience. "I really just had to take one day at a time," she says. "I remember one day when I thought, *Either this is going to work or it's going to kill me.*"



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Forty-eight hours later, a journalist from the Salt Lake Tribune called, and the cafe got a story in the paper. Business picked up considerably. People loved what she was doing. They liked the food and the atmosphere, and they liked the idea that they decided how much their meal was worth. "People were so thrilled they didn't have to overeat," says Cerreta. "They could pay a fair price for what they got." She was able to hire a trained cook and some other staff, and the restaurant began to do the same graceful dance it does every day, with people putting cash in the little box by the door. Some may not put in quite enough, and others put too much. At the end of the day, Cerreta's overhead is covered.

Not only did she switch to donations, but she also adopted a "hand up, not hand out" policy. She began letting people volunteer to work for food vouchers and experience. After proving themselves useful in a particular aspect of the kitchen, she gives them a certificate validating their expertise. With this they can go on to work in the food industry. She also switched all the food to organic fare in an effort to inspire the community as a whole to eat more healthily and began eliminating any food waste she could. Imagine organic greens galore, quiches, soups, fish, meat and a restaurant favorite, the Everything Cookie. Does it matter what's in it when it tastes amazing? The cook staff decides what they want to cook for the day and new creations happen often.

But instead of just continuing to run her happy little café, Cerreta decided to take the idea of the cafe and her life purpose forward. She and two others started the One World Everybody Eats Foundation. Their goal is to take One World's successful business model and place it in cities around the country. They are in the process of getting their non-profit status from the IRS, and once the paperwork is complete, the necessary fundraising will begin to start other cafes. The first cities on their list: New York, Washington D.C., St. Paul, Chicago and Iowa City. After starting the cafes, the foundation will sell franchises to owners agreeing to run it in One World style.

"We're giving business owners the possibility to serve their community and the world," says Cerreta. She has also begun giving lectures about her business model and the café and plans to publish a book, *Spirit in Business*. Something she obviously knows something about.

While the cynicals out there would think most people would take their food and run, they're dead wrong. "People love the system so much that they want to protect it," Cerreta says. "Whoever comes in knows that there is some way they can eat."

It seems like the little voice in back of Cerreta's head was effective. Or perhaps it just decided to speak to the right person.

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