

Schoonmaker: A café with the hope of a sweeter life

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THE FIRST THING that struck me about in Teaneck was the color of the paint on the walls. It is a soft shade of yellow, but not just any shade. It was obviously chosen with care and love and with a purpose.



It's an evocative color that brings to mind everything good about a bakery: butter, cream, sugar, sweetness and warmth.

The women in charge of the new cafe, Jane Fiedler and Miriam Bloom, chose the color as much for those who will work there as for the customers. They wanted to create a comfortable, welcoming, happy place.

That's because Zoe's is no ordinary bakery. It is a small business that benefits Zoe's Place Inc., a non-profit organization that provides a support system for pregnant Bergen County teenagers, teen moms and their babies. Its services range from safe housing to delivery of diapers and formula, even transportation to doctor's appointments. There is also a help line, a mentoring program and a teen support group.

Now a new service will be added: work experience in Zoe's Café that will offer girls job training and skills they will need in seeking other jobs later on, such as customer service, punctuality, bookkeeping — and making cupcakes, under the guidance of a professional pastry chef.



Philanthropic contribution

Zoe's Place has been around since 2003, but the café just opened last week, thanks to a \$100,000 grant from Women United in Philanthropy, a "giving circle" of North Jersey women who choose one project a year to support. Each member makes an annual contribution of \$1,000. Then they invite applications and vote on the one they believe is the best investment for their money and offers the most promising and innovative help for women.

In the past, the circle's grants have gone to transitional housing for homeless single mothers and to a support program that teaches financial and health care management skills to senior women living alone.

Out of 31 proposals this time around, Zoe's Place was picked. The women who voted for it were impressed by the idea that the cupcake café would be a "social enterprise," helping pregnant teens become healthy, self-sufficient and capable young women. They were also impressed by the hard work and compassion of all those involved in Zoe's Place, who give of themselves so generously.

Fiedler and Bloom said the same "we-believe-in-you" spirit that inspired Women United in Philanthropy to award them the grant is what Zoe's Place offers pregnant teens: We know you have potential and we're going to give you a chance.

Don't know where to turn

For many of the teens they see, no one else in their lives has said that. Most don't know where to turn. Judy Forman, who is in charge of Zoe's Place support services, said she works with girls living with parents, with boyfriends, in shelters, on friends' couches or even homeless. They can be as young as 12, but most are 16 or 17, and most need help and housing.

Another long-held dream Zoe's Place will soon realize is a home for five teens and their babies in Garfield, built by Habitat for Humanity and scheduled to open this fall. Revenues from the café will help support the home and the services for teens. The plan is that the home in Garfield will be as warm and welcoming as the café, offering the girls a taste of a loving, stable family life and giving them a start on that path.

As cupcakes baked in the café's oven one morning this week, Fiedler and Bloom compared their goal to the proverb attributed to Taoist philosopher Lao Tse: "Give a man a fish, feed him for a day; teach a man to fish, feed him for a lifetime."

I like their version better. "Give a teen mom a cupcake, feed her for a day; teach a teen mom to make cupcakes, feed her and her baby for a lifetime."

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