

CENTER FOR DISABILITIES AND DEVELOPMENT

# Possibilities in Education and Training

*A quarterly publication of the Center for Disabilities and Development, Iowa's University Center for Excellence on Disabilities at the University of Iowa Children's Hospital, Iowa City, Iowa 52242-1011*

---

## ***From Creativity to Coffee The Em and Jerri's Story***

---

"What would you like for lunch," asked the friendly voice behind the counter. Then, recognizing that I am blind, she began reading the menu. Insightful under any circumstances, it's particularly impressive when you realize that the voice belongs to a woman who has worked the Em and Jerri's coffee shop counter for only two months after years of unemployment.

The "Em" of Em and Jerri's is Emilea Hillman, a vivacious 21-year-old entrepreneur who happens to have a disability. The "Jerri" is Jerri Reisner, Em's job coach and the coffee shop's manager.

"In the fall of 2008, a group began meeting to discuss employment options for people with disabilities in Independence," said Tami Fenner, Em's mother. "The group got smaller and smaller, until the only people remaining were Em's support team."

The team consists of Tami, Em's sister Ashlea and her husband, and Jerri, then a community trainer at Goodwill. Recognizing that the traditional service system would not allow Em to reach her potential, they began to brainstorm. Em needed something which would allow frequent contact with the public. Both coffee shops in Independence had closed. The idea to create Em and Jerri's was born.

Tami set her informal network in motion, contacting a friend who works for the Iowa Department of Human Services. Her friend referred her to Sheila Stoekel, an Iowa Workforce Development benefits planner. Sheila, in turn, put Tami in touch with the father of Poppin' Joe, another entrepreneur with a disability who sells kettle corn. Armed with the knowledge that her idea was viable, Tami approached Iowa Vocational Rehabilitation Services, securing a small business development grant. With the purchase of a building, Em and Jerri's was born.

The team's enterprising spirit then kicked into high gear. Deciding on a 1950's motif, the team purchased and received donations of materials and furniture. Em and Jerri recovered chairs. Em attended barista training in Minneapolis, and with some minor modifications to the equipment, was "ready to go" for December's grand opening.

When I arrived, Em and Jerri's was a hub of activity. Between greeting customers, answering the phone, and supervising staff, Em found a few minutes to talk to me.

"I open the shop at 5:35," she beamed, proudly showing off her key. "I get right to work doing my favorite thing--make coffee!"

With the assistance of a fellow housing board member, Tami recently secured a \$22,500 USDA grant which will assist Em to cover payroll, rent and utilities. Grant funds also purchased woodworking tools and lumber, allowing Em to launch a satellite business, Emilea's Enterprises, which will market and sell handmade wood products.

Em and Jerri's is already giving back to the community. A section of the shop, called the Newsroom, is dedicated to the Independence Bulletin-Journal, which once occupied the premises. Prominently displayed is a copy of a page from a 1921 issue. On the reverse side, we see a 2009 article featuring Em and Jerri's. The Bulletin-Journal's editor, whose brother has Down syndrome, has drawn inspiration from Em's accomplishments. So, too, has the mother of a 14-year-old boy with autism who wants to be an Italian chef. "It's all about networking," says Tami with a smile.

This writer, too, has drawn inspiration from Em. He is reminded of Ed Roberts, the founder of the Independent Living movement, who was told by professionals that he could not be competitively employed due to the severity of his disability. When Em was born, her parents were told that she would never walk or talk and that she should be institutionalized. As a teenager, she was told that her disability was too severe for competitive employment. As the old song says, "Oh, look at me now!"

Em and Jerri's is open from 6 AM to 5 PM Monday through Friday, and 7 AM to 2 PM on Saturday. It is located at 324 First Street East in Independence.

---

**Possibilities** is a quarterly publication of the  
Center for Disabilities and Development  
Iowa's University Center for Excellence on Disabilities  
at the University of Iowa Children's Hospital  
Iowa City, Iowa 52242-1011

