

‘Abilities not disabilities’: A Kendall coffee shop hired them when others wouldn’t

[BY CARLOS FRÍAS](#)

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<https://www.miamiherald.com/news/local/community/miami-dade/kendall/article235478332.html>

Our Grounds, a Kendall coffee shop, is training people with developmental disabilities by offering them work experience as either a barista or a cashier. BY [MATIAS J. OCNER](#) | [CARLOS FRÍAS](#)

It was the chalkboard sign outside the coffee shop — “We are a non-profit. We focus on ABILITIES not disabilities” — that drew Keren Campbell inside.

Her face brightened at the mint-colored walls, brick accents and the pair of smiles behind the counter at Our Grounds coffee shop as Ella Fitzgerald sang softly overhead.

“I’m not used to ordering fancy coffee,” she told the cashier, Jillian Joerg, who patiently walked her through the menu of espresso drinks.

Then the barista, Brian Schwartz, made her a perfect cortado (decaf, with just a touch of foam).

In them she saw not just a pair of millennials, but her own 24-year-old daughter, a college graduate recently diagnosed with autism.

“That’s what makes me feel so wonderful about this place,” Campbell said. “Getting and keeping a job, people don’t understand how difficult it is for people (with disabilities).”

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Jillian Joerg, 29, center, a cashier, takes an order from customers at Our Grounds in Kendall. Our Grounds is training people with developmental disabilities by offering them work experience as either a barista or a cashier at the coffee shop. Vanessa Vila, left, created this store as an extension of her work as an occupational therapist. MATIAS J. OCHNER MOCNER@MIAMIHERALD.COM

Our Grounds, which opened in the quiet Sabal Chase strip mall near Miami Dade College South in July, is a registered non-profit which employs people with developmental disabilities. The jobs are designed to build an employee's confidence and to teach them to interact with customers in a real-world setting.

Oh, and they brew a fine cup of coffee.

“I want to be an example for people like me,” said Joerg, whose disability requires her to use a walker or a wheelchair. “I’m a people person. I like talking to others. So this is perfect.”

Watching these early successes inspires Vanessa Vila, 31, who opened Our Grounds after working as an occupational therapist, helping teens and young adults perform tasks they need at school and work.

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But parents came to her frustrated that as their children graduated from the structure of high school and college, they found employers unwilling to hire them. The unemployment rate for people with a disability is more than twice that of those without, according to a 2019 report from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Many are more than qualified. Schwartz, 27, has a undergraduate degree in mathematics from the University of Miami and Joerg, 29, an associate degree from Miami Dade College. Yet Joerg said she was turned down 19 times for jobs before Our Grounds came along.

“I tried to think out of the box about what people really needed,” Vila said.

Her solution was right next door.



Fresh baked almond croissants are on display at Our Grounds, which partners with local bakeries to provide treats to pair with Fort Lauderdale’s Argyle Coffee. MATIAS J. OCNER MOCNER@MIAMIHERALD.COM

Her husband of four years, Eric Huertas, a Coral Gables native, had run family pizza restaurants in Washington D.C. before returning to South Florida to open his own artisanal pizza shop, Local Pie, in this suburban shopping mall. He uses ingredients from other locals for his pizzas, such as roasted chicken from Hate Mondays Tavern and honey South Miami's The Native Guy.

Vila split her time the last year working as a private occupational therapist, and, after hours, running the register at their year-old pizza shop — all while eyeing the empty space next door.

“We always knew she was going to do her own thing one day,” Huertas said. “Everybody knew Vanessa’s dream.”

Vila applied for her 501c3 non-profit certification, signed a lease on the space next door and took a crash course in coffee, partnering with Argyle Coffee Roasters in Fort Lauderdale. She buys her pastries from Atelier Monnier French bakery, brownies and cookies from the nearby Pretty Sweet Bakehouse, and vegan and gluten-free baked goods from Amla Miami Bakery.

Vila, whose mother was an elementary school teacher, designed separate training programs for cashier and barista, which includes learning the history of coffee to its agriculture and roasting.

“At upscale coffee shops, baristas get that kind of training so why not expand their knowledge in that, too?” Vila said.



Jillian Joerg, 29, (right) a cashier, greets customers and takes orders at Our Grounds in Kendall, Florida. Vanessa Vila, left, founded Our Grounds as a training place for people with developmental disabilities. It an extension of her career as an occupational therapist. MATIAS J. OCNER MOCNER@MIAMIHERALD.COM

Our Grounds is up to eight employees. The positions are unpaid, with the goal that her trainees feel confident enough to apply for jobs with real-world experience on their resumes. She said she hopes to hire several of them full time after they complete their training.

“This is my first real job,” said Schwartz, who drives from Miami to Kendall for his shifts as a barista. “I feel like I’m becoming very independent now. It makes me feel like a productive member of society. And I just like seeing the customers with a smile on their face when I make their drinks.”

Vila works closely with her trainees, her role more therapist than business owner.

While sitting in the dining room, she flicks her head around often to see if either of her trainees looks up at her for help. She pops up to watch Joerg enter transactions, supervises Schwartz as he steams milk for a latte.

And when a young couple finishes their drinks and heads for the door, Vila smiles when Joerg gently waves to them and calls out, “Come back soon!”

“She doesn’t look at me as someone with a disability,” Joerg says later. “When I’m here, I forget I have a disability.”

OUR GROUNDS COFFEE SHOP

Details: 10714 SW 113th Pl., Kendall. Hours: Tuesday-Friday, 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Saturday and Sunday, 9 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.



Brian Schwartz, 27, a barista, prepares and serves coffee to customers at Our Grounds in Kendall, Florida. Our Grounds is training people with developmental disabilities by offering them work experience as either a barista or a cashier at the coffee shop. *MATIAS J. OCNER MOCNER@MIAMIHERALD.COM*